A DARKNESS STIRS IN THE ANTARCTIC

THE SPAWNING

BOOK TWO OF THE HIVE SERIES

TIM CURRAN

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For all those lost in the Cold White . . .

PROLOGUE

BEHOLD, I STAND AT THE DOOR AND KNOCK

Evil is of old date

—Arab proverb

1

MOUNT HOBB RESEARCH STATION,
QUEEN MAUD MOUNTAINS
JANUARY 13

ANTARCTICA.

Austral Summer.

Butler came awake in the semi-darkness, knowing and not knowing. She instinctively sensed something was wrong. She could feel a disruption, a shattering of the ether around her like spiderwebbing cracks in a broken window pane spreading out, intersecting, connecting until they formed a great ragged chasm that she thought she might just fall into and never, ever find her way back out of again.

She blinked.

Took a couple deep breaths.

The digital clock on the nightstand said it was 11:30 p.m. exactly.

Looking around her room, she had the oddest sense there had been a subtle transition as she slept. Things had shifted, moved, been handled and placed back in their respective positions just awry enough so only she would notice.

And it wasn't just her possessions, but the entire room itself.

It was out of sync somehow. Even in the darkness, she was certain that everything was closer together or farther apart, disarranged ever so slightly.

It made her feel claustrophobic, violated almost.

Outside the main compound, the wind screamed like it was frightened. Snow and fine ice crystals blew around in a whirlwind scraping against the outer walls like a Saharan sandstorm, desperate to get in and steal warmth.

The wind had not woken her. It was something else.

Lying there in her joggers and sweatshirt, her tongue brushing over her wind-burned lips, she tried to figure out what it was. She was almost certain her name had been called, a papery and rustling sound that broke into her sleep.

She sat up, listening, feeling the chill of the room that even the electric heat could not completely chase away.

Her senses were activated, heightened, keen and sharp.

She could feel the station around her and, like her room, it did not feel right.

Something's wrong here.

Breathing shallowly, trying to shut out the boom of her own heart, she listened for something. Anything. The sound of snoring from the other rooms. Somebody making a sleepy vigil to the head.

But there was nothing, nothing at all.

The station was still as a tomb and that was not right. There was always somebody about. One of the maintenance crew or somebody bumping around down in the kitchen, the distant murmur of a DVD being watched or a CD being listened to. Maybe one of the guys outside firing up the plows. A scientist crossing the station quadrant, making for the meteorology hut or the astronomy dome.

There was always *something*.

There were twenty-five people at Hobb . . . but right then, she was certain it was empty.

Listen.

Yes, she was hearing a sound now.

One that came and went very quickly. An odd sort of sound. A scratching like a fork had been dragged over the wall farther down the corridor.

She tensed.

Heard it again. Nearer this time.

Somebody was out there, walking down the corridor with an odd thumping locomotion that did not sound like feet at all. She could hear them

brushing the walls, scratching them as they passed. There was a rubbery, slithery sort of noise out there like snakes coiling over other snakes. And then an acrid, sharp stink like chemicals right outside her door.

Whoever or *whatever* was out there paused before her room now, breathing with a low susurration of wind blown through bellows.

Butler was terrified.

The fear moved through her in sickening hot waves. She almost felt physically ill with it. She was shaking, a white heat spreading out in her chest.

There was a scraping at the door, a rustling and busy sound like vines—a forest of them—were brushing against the door, trying to find a way in.

The doorknob began to shake, it rattled back and forth.

She always kept it locked. Something you learned to do when you were but one of three women in a camp full of randy men.

That breathing again, deepening now as if its owner was growing excited.

Then a whispering voice: *"Butler."*

She nearly screamed at the sound of it.

As it was, she had to press a fist to her mouth and bite down on her knuckles so she didn't cry out. That voice. Dear God, reedy and trilling. Like the way an insect might call your name. She wanted to think that it was maybe Cortland or Van Erb out there, both of whom were fond of practical jokes, but she knew it wasn't them.

Human vocal cords could not make such a sound.

Whatever was out there . . . she could not imagine what it might be.

It's waiting for you. It knows you're here.

The chemical stink was still heavy in the air, horribly pungent.

Then those padding, thumping steps moved off down the corridor.

For five minutes, nothing but silence.

The smell faded, left only a curious after-odor like you might smell in a taxidermist's workshop. The scent of dehydrated things.

She swung her feet off the bed, wishing she had a gun. But they were not allowed at the station. Trying to be quiet, she slid open a drawer and pulled out a jackknife. She didn't know what any of this was about, but she had no doubt she was in danger. Nobody had to tell her that: she could feel it right up her spine and down low in her belly.

Not knowing if it was a good idea or not, she turned on the lights.

Everything looked the way she had left it when she went to bed some six hours previously. But still there was that nagging suspicion that someone or something had been in her room, looking through her things and perhaps standing over her as she slept. She did not want to think about what that might have been.

There were whorls of frost on the walls, crystallized on the ceiling. Already, the coming polar winter was making itself known, exhaling a breath of glacial wind.

Sighing, Butler pulled on a bulky sweater and slipped her boots on so her feet wouldn't freeze to the floor.

That's when she noticed clots of ice over near her little desk.

They were melting.

Like maybe someone had come out of the blowing subzero darkness outside and ice had been dropping from them. Her papers were spread around, crumpled as if they'd been handled roughly. There was something like saliva, wet and ropy, clinging to the papers themselves.

But it wasn't saliva.

Something liquid and wet, yes, but acidic-smelling.

Whatever the hell it was, it was not water. It was something caustic that had made the letters and figures on her computer printout run. Some of the pages were just a blur, everything smeared together like a child's finger-painting.

Those papers had been important.

The first draft of an article on quasar evolution she had been writing for a Canadian astronomy magazine. She still had it on disk, but the idea that someone or some *thing* had come in here and tampered with her work, not

just leafed through it, but poured some astringent chemical on it and ruined her fine, organized thoughts, well . . . it simply pissed her off.

Butler was no shrinking violet.

Maybe she was scared right to her core, but she was also angry.

The daughter of a Welsh fisherman, Butler grew up in the tough fishing port of Skydurst on the Bristol Channel. And nobody came out of a town like that without knowing how to take care of themselves.

Right then, her work ruined, Butler was less the London University cosmologist and every bit the tough fisherman's daughter. A woman brought up in a place where if you couldn't hit harder and swear louder than the majority of the boys, you stood scarce chance of holding onto your virginity past your thirteenth year. And as testament to that, Butler had managed to protect her own until her first year at Cardiff University when she fell in love with a rugby player.

Breathing hard, she went over to the door and reached for the lock.

She was going to go out there.

She was going deal with whoever had done this.

She grasped the doorknob and it was still locked. Apparently, this person had picked the lock, came in, and locked it before they left.

It didn't make any sense.

There was a sudden loud pounding from the other side of the door.

Stifling a cry, but refusing to scream, she fell on her ass, bumping her head against the metal bed frame. Scared, confused, too many things to catalog, she said, "Who's out there? You better damn well answer me or I'm coming out there with my knife! You hear me?"

There was nothing but silence.

Enough.

Butler scrambled to her feet and thumbed the intercom on the wall, bringing up the station-wide channel. "If anybody's out there, give me a holler! This is Butler! I'm in the dorm! Brighten? Van Erb? *Callaway?* Is anybody goddamn well out there?"

There was silence for a moment, her voice echoing through the station.

Then a peal of static from the speaker.
And a voice, a shrill and buzzing voice: *"Butler,"* it said.
This time she did scream.

2

GOING OUT INTO THE corridor took every ounce of strength she'd ever had.

This was madness. That's all. Just madness.

Butler was a cosmologist. She'd come for a winter at Mount Hobb Station because Antarctica was simply the finest place in the world to watch the stars and listen to them. The stars did not set at mid-winter, they blazed on and on, circling slowly overhead in that field of blackness. You could study quasars and pulsars and listen to the teeming radio emissions of the galaxy itself. The voice of the galactic magnetic field. And more importantly, to her own field of study, you could learn about those great clouds of organic molecules that drifted between the stars themselves. Dense molecular clouds, the very stuff of life itself waiting to seed barren worlds.

No, she had not come here for this . . . whatever *this* was.

Out in the corridor, she saw more clots of melting ice.

And prints . . . at least, she *thought* they were prints.

They were wet, moving down the corridor past her room. Even now, in the dry atmosphere of the station, they were beginning to evaporate.

Breathing in and out slowly to keep herself calm, Butler squatted down and examined them.

They were triangular, about eight inches long, splayed out at their widest point to maybe five or six inches. If she hadn't known better, she would have thought somebody had walked through here with swim flippers on. The marks were like that, but not exactly. And there were many of them crowded together which made her think maybe two people had been wearing them and walking abreast.

There's no pool around here, she thought. *Whatever made them was caked with ice and snow. It came in from outside. The same thing that left that sharp stink . . .*

She wasn't sure what to think or what unknown paths her mind was taking her down. She only knew that her visitor had been most unusual. But what could come out of the night and cold and smell like that and leave such weird prints?

She rushed down the corridor.

She knocked on doors, calling out the names of scientists and techies and contract personnel.

But there was no answer.

Just silence.

A silence that was big and overwhelming. One that made her want to crawl under a bed and hide.

Relax, just relax.

Yes, that was how you handled problems like this.

You didn't climb walls and scream and have nervous breakdowns, you simply took care of business. As frightened as you were, you simply erased the human factor and applied the scientific method. If some creature had come into camp, then you figured out what. If everyone was gone, then you found out where they'd gone *to.*

Oh, and didn't that sound perfectly simple?

But it was not so simple with the compound lying around her, silent and waiting and somehow deadly. You could tell yourself by the light of day that a mausoleum was just a mausoleum, but try spending the night there.

She tried the door to Sandley's room first.

Sandley was a botanist and one of the other female residents. It was open. Clicking on the light, Butler looked around in there, maybe expecting to see something horrible like a hacked and bloody corpse, but seeing absolutely nothing.

The room was just empty.

The bedcovers were tossed aside as if Sandley had gotten up in the middle of the night to get a drink and never returned.

"Sandy," Butler said under her breath. "Where are you? What happened here?"

Whoever had come for her—and by that point, Butler was sure that someone or some*thing* had—they had not messed up the papers on her desk or dropped ice. The floor was damp in spots, but that meant nothing. If the heat got cranked up enough, water started dripping everywhere in the dorm rooms.

She went over to the bed.

The blankets felt cold and . . . Jesus, there was more of that saliva threaded onto the pillow and dangling from the sheet like snot. And in the air, that same chemical odor. Old . . . but persistent.

Butler frantically checked the other rooms in the dorm. Van Erb. Johnson. Elder. Brighten. Lee. Huptmann. Callaway. O'Toole.

Empty.

Empty.

Empty.

Empty.

Even the ones of the contract workers who ran the place. All the rooms were empty. All the beds looked slept in. There was more of that slime . . . on the beds, on the walls, on the doorknobs.

The floors were damp.

But no people anywhere.

Butler raced to the end of the corridor and went into Gillian's room.

Gillian was the station manager. He ran the whole show and if anybody was on top of things, it would have been him.

His room was not quite like the others. The bed was slept in, yes, but everything was in disarray as if there'd been a struggle. The desk was tipped over. Files and papers scattered about. On the walls there were ragged scratches like knife blades had been dragged over them. On the floor, there was a rosary as if he'd been praying when it . . . whatever it was . . . had happened.

And whatever it had been, it had not taken him completely by surprise.

Not like the others.

Butler knew she had to formulate a plan.

The rest of the station had to be checked, even the lower levels. And when that was done, she would have to go outside and look in the garages and outbuildings, the warm-up shacks. Then she would get on the radio, send out a distress call on the emergency channel. Contact Rothera Station on Adelaide Island. Send her voice loud and clear so they would hear it everywhere, Pole Station and Vostok, Polar Clime and McMurdo . . . hear it all over the goddamn continent.

Yes, that's what she'd do.

Out in the corridor, breathing hard, she knew none of that would change one unpleasant little fact: she was alone. She was alone at Mount Hobb.

Trapped on the bottom of the world.

An easy hundred miles from the nearest occupied camp. And with the way the weather was kicking up outside, nobody would be able to get to her.

Just her.

And the wind.

The cold.

The emptiness.

And whatever had left those tracks and abducted everyone.

3

SHE TRIED TO RELAX, tried to figure it out.

But all her mind kept coming back to was the very thing she did not want to think about: what was out in Shack #3. The relic that Huptmann and Dr. Elder had collected somewhere in the vicinity of the abandoned American installation, Kharkov Station. They kept it under lock and key out in Shack #3 and refused to say what it was.

But there were rumors.

With what had happened at Kharkov years back, there were plenty of rumors.

But you don't believe that nonsense. Those wild tales that came out of Kharkov. That down in the ice they found–

No, no. Huptmann and Elder were paleobiologists.

Surely what they had found was old, but it was certainly terrestrial.

She kept telling herself this.

Making herself believe.

4

SHE WAS IN FULL-BLOWN panic mode now.

Her science and her reasoning brain had abandoned her. She was overcome and stomped down by the oldest of emotions: primal fear, superstitious terror.

She ran out of the dorms and into the common room where everyone ate and lounged.

She checked the Galley and the workshops.

The labs and storage rooms.

No one anywhere.

The funny thing was that every light was burning bright. The dorm rooms were the only ones with the lights off.

In the common room, she peered out the windows into the Antarctic twilight. It lasted about two hours that time of year before the sun came up again at one a.m. A storm was brewing out there. The wind was blowing, throwing sheets of snow around. The garages were even lit up. She could see the vehicles out there, Deltas and Sno-Cats and big plows with bubble tires.

She thought for a moment she saw a shape darting away into the purple shadows.

But no, it must have been her imagination.

There was no one left. No one at all.

Panicking, on the verge of complete hysteria, Butler stood there in the common room amongst the empty tables, trying to think, trying to come up with something that didn't involve the relic in Shack #3.

She couldn't seem to move.

She was almost afraid to.

Afraid what she might see or feel next.

Because right then, she was feeling things. Things that saw her that she could not see. A crawling sensation that there were eyes watching, watching.

She thought: *Get to the radio room, get out that distress.*

Yes. Yes, that's what she was going to do.

But every direction she started in, everywhere she turned, she could feel something crowding in on her. Something almost palpable, something she could not see but only feel. It filled her brain with tangled shadows and made a cutting dread open up in her belly. Whatever it was, it was close enough to touch and close enough to touch *her.*

That biting chemical odor wafted in her face, making her nostrils sting.

Something that felt like a twig brushed the back of her neck.

She cried out, whirling around, but there was nothing there.

She could hear a sort of hissing sound like a leaking radiator coming from the dorm corridor. She sensed movement all around her, heard distant scraping and scratching sounds.

Trembling, she went to her knees, breathing so hard now she was hyperventilating. *Oh please, oh God, just make it stop, make it all just stop, make it all go away.*

There was a sudden sharp shrilling noise that rose up and died off.

Butler clambered to her feet and ran down towards the labs and radio room.

Three feet away, a door slammed.

Then another at the end of the corridor.

Something in the wall thudded.

Her eyes wide and her skin drawn tight over her bones, she saw another set of those wet flipper-like prints. They moved down the hallway and vanished at a solid wall as if whatever had left them had walked right *through* it.

She turned towards one of the doors that had slammed.

It led to the greenhouse.

She grasped the knob and threw it open. A blast of that chemical odor blew into her face and this time it smelled almost like bleach. It took her breath away and made her eyes water.

In the greenhouse, it was freezing.

Butler saw her breath.

All the plants—tomatoes and beans, carrots and parsnips and assorted other greens—were brown and wilted. She did not know where the cold air came from that killed everything, but her brain told her it could have come from only one possible source: the thing that had come into the station in the dead of night.

She stepped away from the door and saw a creeping shadow thrown against the wall in there and the door slammed shut in her face.

She let out a cry and something very cold passed behind her.

Stumbling, she ran back into the common room.

Right away she saw impossible, nebulous shapes pass by the windows.

She sank to her knees.

The lights flickered as a crackling sound like static electricity rose up.

They flickered again.

The hairs on the back of her neck were standing rigid, gooseflesh sweeping down her spine. The air was getting colder now and this was the first sign of invasion, she knew. That whatever had taken away the others was coming now for *her.* Coming with a chill and a stink and an eruption of energy.

A dark and freezing shadow fell over her.

She turned slowly to face whatever made it.

But there was nothing.

Nothing.

The lights went out.

The entire station was plunged into a murky half-light alive with half-glimpsed shapes and living sentient shadows that circled her and pressed in from all sides.

Down below, the generator cut out.

But the secondary did not kick in.

There was no sound but the wind howling outside.

The entire station shook.

Security lights had come on now and a warning alarm was ringing, telling her that the generator was dead.

Outside the windows, she could see shapes moving about, floating and dipping and pressing up against the glass. The illumination from one of the security lights outside captured a form and cast its shadow at her feet . . . an insane, abstract shadow, stout and conical with snaking, wavering appendages.

She screamed.

Because it was happening.

She did not know how it was she had slept through what had happened before, but she would not sleep through it this time. Now they were coming for her and she could not escape.

Things began to happen.

The temperature started dropping, but too fast for it to have anything to do with the failed generator. This was too rapid, too sudden, too abrupt. A pall of freezing air enveloped her. The floor beneath her began to vibrate and thrum. There were knockings in the walls, slithering sounds moving around her in the darkness. Awful fetid odors. A fluttering sound as of immense wings.

Her entire body was shaking.

She was numb with the cold and terror that settled into her, so infinite and so black.

Her temples were throbbing, sharp white bolts of pain exploding in her head, making her gasp. Making her teeth clench, her eyes roll back white in her head. Her mind was filled with crazy alien imagery and she knew it was not of her own creation, but something from outside, something that was pushing its way into her head. She saw–

—a flurry of black winged shapes taking flight like flies lighting from a corpse. A great swarm of them. They rose up against a series of towering monoliths, narrow and craggy and machinelike, obelisks and spires and honeycombed pylons that reached right into the boiling sky overhead, became the sky itself, slit open the underbelly of the heavens–

She screamed with a horror that was profound.

The sight of that nameless architectural obscenity filled her with a mindless cosmic fear that reached out to her from the very pit of her being. It was a place she had seen in harrowing childhood nightmares she did not remember until now, a place she associated at the time as the castle of some evil witch. But now she knew, as all knew who looked upon that moldering pile of bones out of space and time, that it was the cradle of mankind and ultimately its tomb.

There was a pounding at the main door, a low hollow booming.

This cleared those awful stygian images and oriented her to a fresh slate of horror. One that was here and now and not half-remembered hereditary memory.

Whatever had come for her stood beyond that door now.

It stood out in that blowing white death, something born of shadows and nightmare antiquity.

The knocking came again.

And again.

Voices whispered in her head, shrill and shrieking.

A perverse musical piping that broke her mind like wheat before a scythe, scattering it into shorn grains. And she sat there, crying and shaking and delirious, just waiting for the thing that was coming for her.

Another flurry of pounding and the door blew wide open, snow and wind and subzero air rushing in at her.

It had come for her now.

Backlit by the shuddering security lamps and the weird purple-blue twilight, she saw a tall rigid form, glistening and hung with icicles. A cloud of frost and snow swirled around it, obscuring it.

Coiling limbs reached out for her.
Terrible red eyes looked down upon her with a flat malevolence.
She did not know what it was, only that it was something malignant.
Something shadowy.
Something monstrous.
And whatever it was, it said a single word in that buzzing voice: *"Butler."*

ONE

GRAVEYARD OF THE EONS

Out of whose womb came the ice?

—The Book of Job 38:29

1

POLAR CLIME STATION,
FALLING STAR ICE STREAM,
EAST ANTARCTICA
FEBRUARY 21

A DESERT.

A frozen white desert.

Not a continent exactly, more like a crudely-gutted, rawboned cadaver thrusting from eons-old ice, its hide scraped clean and picked dry, nothing left behind but a meatless architecture of bones that the wind had long ago blown clean.

That was the first thing you thought when you stepped off the plane and onto the frozen crust at Polar Clime. And as you took in the soundless windy desolation around you, the jutting barren peaks of the Transantarctics rising from the snow in the distance like the jagged spines of some long-fossilized saurian, you were even more certain.

The place was lifeless.

An ominous polar desert.

A frozen tomb at the bottom of the world.

To one side towered the mountains that split the continent right in half and to the other, the endless hazy expanse of the polar plateau where the ice cap was three miles thick in places. That was Antarctica. A relic from the Ice Age, simply immense and sterile and just as lifeless as the dark side of the moon. Everywhere, blowing snow and hovering patches of ice-fog, glaciated ridges and horns of sculpted blue ice. The godless repetition was broken only by outcroppings of eroding volcanic rock that were only slighter older than the ice itself. If you stared at them too long, those rocks began to take on hunched quasi-human shapes. And if you didn't look away, you might

hear them speak in a piping dead voice which was the voice of that ancient and mystical continent itself.

At the very edge of the wind-blasted polar plateau itself sat Polar Clime Station.

It looked like some crazy Martian playset a kid had forgotten out in the snow. All the buildings were bright red and flagged, capped by aerials and radar dishes and wind-speed indicators. At the very center sat a low dome with a snapping American flag atop it, boxlike buildings circling around its perimeter and connected by tunnels and drifted walkways.

Clime was a godforsaken place to spend a summer, let alone the long black Antarctic winter where the sun did not truly rise for five months. And when you came for the winter, you were there for good. You and whatever was inside you that might keep you sane while the days became weeks and the weeks became months and boredom set into you with teeth and the wind blew and the snow fell and that white frigid cage held you tight like a berry in a deep freeze.

That was the reality of the eternal darkness at Polar Clime.

The sign on the flagged ice road coming in from the airstrip itself pretty much said it all, all you had to know that year and maybe all you would ever know again:

UNITED STATES ANTARCTIC PROGRAM

NSF POLAR CLIME

WELCOME TO THE END OF THE WORLD

2

WHEN COYLE FIRST HEARD about the disappearance of twenty-five people from Mount Hobb Research Station—the entire summer crew, in fact—he started to get some funny ideas. The sort that made it hard to close his eyes at night and even harder to dismiss some of the crazy stories you heard about down there. Absolutely demented stuff about pre-human cities that were older than the glaciers themselves and things from other worlds supposedly found frozen in the ice.

It was hard to get away from that business and particularly with what had happened down at Kharkov Station five years before.

Not that Coyle really believed any of that, but it was still at the back of his mind like an open sore that refused to heal. Back home, back in the world, all those tales and urban legends were easy enough to laugh off, bored minds with too much time on their hands and too many idiots spinning conspiracy theories on the internet.

But down in the cold wastes . . . well, it wasn't so easy to dismiss regardless of what common sense told you.

There was something about those ice-clad mountains and deep-cut jagged valleys and snow plains blasted by subzero winds. It got inside of you. Told you things you did not want to know and made you remember things long forgotten.

"Hey, Nicky," Frye said and maybe he'd said it more than once because he was looking a little irritated. "Hey, fucking Nicky Coyle, you with me here or what? You listening to a word I'm saying?"

Coyle smiled. He hadn't been paying attention.

Frye just shook his head. "Jee-ZUZ-Christ, a couple weeks into it and you're already getting the long-eye."

Coyle was sitting in a little warm-up shack with Frye, catching the rays off a Preway heater. Though Coyle was a cook—and a damned good one—

he was helping Frye with the off-load from an Air National Guard C-130 transport.

Winter crews were small and you had to help out wherever needed. There were nearly a hundred people at Clime in the summer and just eighteen or nineteen come winter. Mostly the maintenance crew, contract personnel, a few scientists conducting experiments on grants from the NSF. The ANG C-130 idling on the strip was the last they'd see this year.

This was winter off-load: crates and skids and barrels. Machinery parts and medicine, construction materials and laboratory supplies. Food and cold-weather gear and tanks of fuel. Not to mention more important things like DVDs and liquor, tobacco and skin magazines. All the stuff that made the bleak winter livable.

Frye pulled off his cigarette. "Like I was saying, first Kharkov five years ago and now Mount Hobb. Twenty-five Brits missing. Ain't no fish-and-chips out here, baby, so I'm thinking they didn't step out for a bite. You know what that makes me think, man? Makes me think I should say screw this and hop on that One-Thirty, get the hell out of Dodge." He winked at Coyle. "That is, if I was the superstitious type."

"Which you are not."

"Perish the thought. Takes a lot to rattle a guy like me, Nicky. Hell, this'll be my twenty-third year down here. Only the glaciers have been here longer than my wind-burned white ass."

Frye was the Waste Supervisor, but given his experience there wasn't much he couldn't do. He knew the ropes so well he could identify the individual fibers. He was there for off-load because nobody knew better than Frye where everything should be stored. And once the bird was empty, then it would be time to load up the last of the spring waste: flattened cardboard and pure garbage, scrap metal and lab waste, barrels of sewage and contaminated radioactive debris that the scientists produced.

The ice from his beard was melting and Coyle was squeezing it out, droplets of water dropping onto his heated Carhartt overalls and blue parka. "It's all gossip. All we have is gossip about Hobb. Just chatter coming in from McMurdo. Who knows what the hell happened there?"

"That's it, that's it exactly." Frye pulled off his cigarette, a flake of ash falling and blending right in with his steel-gray beard. "Now you're talking sense, Nicky. You get the rest of these wet-ends around here to believe it and we'll have ourselves a real crew. They got a bee in their bonnet ever since that Kharkov business."

And they did, Nicky knew. A real big one.

Something the NSF wasn't real happy about.

3

The NSF ran Polar Clime just as it ran all the other U.S. stations in Antarctica. If you were a scientist and you wanted to keep your funding or a blue collar individual who wanted to keep your very lucrative contracts, you kept your mouth shut. Because ever since the Kharkov thing, nothing could get your ticket down there cancelled quicker than talk of lost cities and extraterrestrials.

If you wanted to keep your job, winter or summer, you had to keep your mouth shut . . . in mixed company, that was.

The U.S. Antarctic Program was managed by the National Science Foundation which itself was an immense bureaucracy. Under NSF auspices, the USAP—or "The Program" as it was known to veteran Polies—ran the whole show. They got the scientists their grants and kept the stations running, some just in the summer and others right through the year. The USAP hired support contractors like Raytheon and ITT to staff its stations, which provided the blue collar muscle that kept the stations going and supported the scientists. Most of the people on the Ice were grunts: mechanics and cooks, heavy equipment operators and electricians, boiler jockeys and pipefitters. Same as in the real world. The pay was good as were the benefits, but the bureaucracy ranged from being trivial and ridiculous to downright intrusive and controlling. The winters were less so, but it was always there.

The great company eye kept watch over everything and everyone.

An unwieldy giant tripping over its own lumbering bureaucratic feet and the reams of requisition forms and safety postings and half-assed psychological profiling that were its lifeblood. People came for the adventure and found a microcosm of the land they had left behind replete with whiners and paperwork, tattling and lying and ruthless self-promotion. A place where your pet rock or incense burner might be confiscated because they were in direct violation of company policy and self-appointed neo-

Nazis reported you for smoking in unauthorized areas or taking too long in the showers or spitting your gum into the snow.

This was modern Antarctica.

Forget about Mawson and Scott and their daring deeds in that pristine wilderness and worry more about using too many staples or not flushing the toilet or not kissing ass on the right people. Social Darwinism at its lowest ebb.

And this, all of this, was the reason why Coyle found it hard to believe that the USAP or NSF could really, effectively, cover-up something of the magnitude of an alien city or a race of beings from beyond the stars. The Program was bloated with bullshit and political maneuvering, poisoned by corporate swindling and overseen by a lumbering, swollen Mickey Mouse bureaucracy that could barely contain the seams of its own pants.

But you never really knew.

Coyle had spent some twelve years on the Ice—proper noun to veteran Polies—and he knew how things worked. Or he liked to think he did. Mostly he worked winters because the crews were smaller and the NSF stranglehold was lighter. Frye and he had wintered-over together the past four years straight, three of them at Clime and the other at Amundsen-Scott Station, which was known to vets as "Pole Station" and never anything else. Before that, they had pulled winters and summers at McMurdo and Palmer and even a couple stretches at East Camp, which was across the runway from the Russian camp at Vostok. They'd spent a lot of time together and were pretty tight, like brothers or father and son. Same blood running through their veins. That's how Coyle knew that Frye was asking him what he thought about all that Mount Hobb business without actually *asking* him.

Not that he'd ever admit to it.

Frye was a working class hardcase from toenail to eyelash, a real terror to workers and managers and beakers alike. Foul-mouthed and evil-tempered and plain intolerant of anybody who had not been on the Ice at least a decade, he would never, ever admit that the whole Kharkov thing spooked him and the Mount Hobb business was bringing it all back in spades.

Never.

4

FRYE STOMPED OUT HIS cigarette, pulled out a bag of Red Man chew and stuffed the rough-cut leaves into his cheek, started working them. "Sometimes I get to thinking about Kharkov. Crazy shit that was."

"NSF said those people choked to death. Gas. As a good little employee who's looking forward to his fat little bonus for being such a cooperative rat in the maze, I must believe what is told me, my friend. The NSF is incapable of mistruth."

"Good boy, Nicky. You suck NSF ass, that's the way. You'll go places. It worked for me. Twenty-five years ago I was washing dishes at McMurdo and now look at me. I've moved up to sewage."

Coyle smiled. "Point being, I don't know what happened at Kharkov. Maybe I don't want to know anymore than I want to know what happened at Hobb. But the way I see it, we'll never know the truth, so we're better off to sweep it all under the rug with the rest."

"Ain't you curious, Nicky?"

"Sure, but I know trouble when I see it."

And it was trouble.

He knew that much. The whole Kharkov business was shady and he had a feeling the Hobb business would be the same. He didn't like any of it. The winters were long enough without imagining things. Coyle was invited down to the stations every year and that was partly because of his Ice-Time and mostly because he was a damn good cook and station managers fought over him. But it wasn't because he was a company man or an ass-kisser. He ran the NSF down as much as anyone, he just did it under his breath was all.

You don't bite the hand that feeds.

"You know what that mother-raper Locke is spouting off about? He says this winter's gonna be like that one five years ago," Frye said. "Same spooky shit going on, only it's starting earlier this time around, he says. That's what

he told me over my eggs this morning . . . and damn good eggs, too, Nicky. Just like that winter when the shit hit the fan at Kharkov, he tells me. We got field camps with scientists out there. That means something big's going down, Locke says. You know they don't run field camps, not in the winter. The only time I ever heard of it was that year at Kharkov when that beaker . . . what was his name? Gates? When he found that buried city."

"Oh, but the company says that didn't happen either, Frye. No ancient cities. No nothing."

"What about the stones? Those standing stones?" Frye said, baiting him.

Frye was talking about a series of ancient megaliths similar to those at Stonehenge that had been discovered the autumn before in an upland valley of the Queen Maud Mountains, about fifteen miles west of the Mount Hobb Research Station. There had been some unprecedented melting that had exposed the very tops of the structures. At first, they were thought to be the sheared-off tops of petrified trees. Great stands of fossilized trees from the Permian had been discovered in Antarctica before. But these were not trees. Scientists from Hobb melted the structures out of the ice and suctioned off the meltwater and there, lo and behold, were an intricate series of megaliths. Within days, the images of those standing stones—which apparently had been worked by a very early civilization—were all over the internet and on the covers of hundreds of magazines.

And the debate began.

"They're still arguing about those stones," Coyle told him. "Some people are saying it's a hoax."

"Could be, Nicky, could be."

Danny Shin, the geologist that was wintering-over at Clime, told Coyle that the Queen Maud Range had been covered in ice for at least twenty-million years, more likely thirty or forty. That ice was incredibly old. The land beneath had not been exposed since, so whoever built those monuments did it eons before the ancestors of men had even developed. Shin wouldn't say anymore, but you could pretty much use your imagination.

And people were. Everything from alien astronauts to unknown super civilizations. But the megaliths had not been studied in any detail as yet.

That would be coming next summer . . . and then? Who could say?

"That Locke is one crazy sonofabitch," Frye said.

Coyle laughed. "Locke believes in UFOs and Atlantis and the faces on Mars. He's nuts."

"He said those stones are some kind of beacon. Beacon? I says. Sure, they found 'em in Beacon Valley. He missed the joke. Guy don't have no sense of humor. Beacon, he says, *a* beacon. Hell you mean? I says. Beacon, like an antenna or something, he says. Beacon for something, aliens or some shit. I don't know. Guy talks so fast I can't understand him sometimes. But he says that's what happened to those limies at Hobb. They got scooped up by something and taken to Venus or one of them places to get their asses probed. He also says there's a team up at Kharkov and that they're drilling down to that lake again."

Coyle had heard that one, too.

Some kind of hush-hush thing going on.

Kharkov had been a Soviet installation back in the sixties and seventies and then they handed it over to the Americans after they kicked communism to the curb and were trying to cut their budget. They still operated Vostok and a few others, but Kharkov belonged to the Americans now. At least, it had until that crazy business five years ago. It had been abandoned since. Now, maybe, it was up and running again. But why with winter coming on? Things like that made Coyle almost believe some of the rumors circulating.

Twelve years on the Ice and sometimes he felt like he didn't have a clue, that things were happening in the shadows that he couldn't even guess at. Or want to.

Frye said, "Locke says it's gonna be just like that winter five years ago. Field camps. People disappearing. It ain't gonna be good, says he. Those beakers are stirring things up down here, melting out those standing stones and exploring that lake. It's been quiet for awhile and now it's about to get real *loud*. Least, that's what Locke is saying." Frye laughed. "You should've seen that little monkeyskull in the lounge this morning, Nicky. He was going on and on about that stuff and I was telling him his mother should've kept

her legs closed, but everyone else was listening. Even the beakers. Think it was Jesus coming to preach at a tent meeting and not that comic book nerd."

Coyle didn't say anymore about it.

Listening to the wind howling around the hut, he felt something sink inside him like a stone. You could try and talk sense and rationalize things as much as you wanted, he knew, but the fact remained: twenty-five people had disappeared into thin air at Hobb and that was just plain disturbing.

"Long freaky winter," Frye said. "Who knows? Maybe Locke's right."

And then, throughout the camp, a siren began to shrill.

5

RIGHT AWAY COYLE THOUGHT it was another drill, but then Hopper, the manager at Clime, came over the intercom: "THIS IS NOT A DRILL! REPEAT! THIS IS NOT A DRILL! MASS CASUALTY TEAMS REPORT TO YOUR STATIONS! REPEAT! THIS IS NOT A DRILL!"

Shit.

Coyle and Frye came bolting out of the shack into the semi-darkness, confused and stumbling, wondering what the hell was going on. The siren was sounding all over camp like an air raid warning. The ANG pilots from the C-130 were outside, wanting to know what was going on. People were scurrying around like ants, slipping on the ice and pouring out of buildings and Jamesway huts and sheds. Everyone was looking for fire or an explosion, some hint that the shit had hit the fan.

But there was nothing.

Everything looked fine.

Then Hopper came back over the loudspeaker saying that a helicopter from nearby Colony Station had crashed out on the ice. He didn't have any casualty figures or details, only that it had happened and Casualty Teams were being scrambled.

It was no drill.

Coyle formed up with his group, began quickly loading medical equipment and stretchers onto one of the Sno-Cats for the journey. As he climbed into the cab with Special Ed—Ed Tavares—the Human Resources guy, and Horn, a mechanic, he saw that Frye's Sno-Cat was already heading off down the flagged ice road at a good clip.

"Why the hell were they flying a helicopter around?" Coyle wanted to know.

"I'm sure they had their reasons," Special Ed said, diplomatic as only Special Ed could be. He was leader of the Mass Casualty Team.

Working the shift and bringing the 'Cat around, Horn just laughed. "Yeah, I just bet they do. Goddamn Colony. Way I'm hearing it, it's a goddamn freakshow over there. Those boys are up to something, but you just try and find out what."

"There's no mystery to Colony Station," Special Ed said.

But said no more on the subject.

By the end of February, the planes stopped flying. Everything was grounded including helicopters. No Sprytes or Sno-Cats coming in from the deep-field projects. No tourists or journalists or other DVs, distinguished visitors. Nobody but essential personnel. The winds tended to blow and the snow tended to fly and what illumination there was, was grainy more often than not.

This time of year, the sun did not really rise. It hovered over the ice for a few hours casting a dim light before giving up the ghost and sinking from sight. Another week and it would be gone entirely. Not exactly prime flying conditions, particularly for a helicopter.

Outside of the 'Cat, the world was hazy and white and surreal. Sometimes the winds would gust up to thirty miles an hour and then just drop away and it would look like they were driving through one of those glass paperweights that you shook to make a tiny blizzard. Just suspended snowflakes drifting back down to the frozen hardpack.

The whole way to the crash site everyone was a little on edge and when they got that way, they started picking at each other.

Not Special Ed, of course.

He was the HR guy and he went out of his way to make people happy, which often got him in reams of trouble. Promising this one something and promising someone else the same thing and then having to lie and swindle his way out. It was commonly known he had no backbone and nothing swinging between his legs. He was a company man all the way, always trying to smooth things over between the NSF and the station personnel. He took shit from both ends and tried to keep everyone smiling which was simply impossible.

Coyle knew he meant well, but sometimes it was hard not to think of him as a weasel. All of which had gotten him the name of "Special Ed," because, boy, he was special, all right.

Right then, Horn was saying how Colony Station was run by the CIA and those spooks were playing around with nukes and germ warfare agents, threatening the whole goddamn continent and the free world in general. They were smuggling Middle Eastern terrorists down there, he said, so they could torture them in private, testing experimental laxatives on them.

All of which made Special Ed bristle because that was dangerous talk and wouldn't look good in his reports and to a guy like him reports were everything.

"They're just involved in some delicate research at Colony," he said. "The station is staffed by some very bright people. I've been there. There's nothing strange about the place."

"Ah, they're running black ops out of there. Ask anyone," Horn said. "Goddamn spooks."

"That's ridiculous," Special Ed said.

Special Ed didn't like Horn, Coyle knew.

He didn't like many at Clime. But he put up with them and volunteered as the camp whipping boy just to keep things chugging along.

After one particularly ugly incident the week before when Gut—a.k.a. Natalie Gutman, a lady who was nearly as feminine as her nickname—gave Special Ed the mother of all ass-chewings in the Galley right in front of everyone, Coyle had asked him why he put up with it. Why he let those people treat him like dirt. And Special Ed told him, "I'd rather they took it out on me than on each other."

Horn was part of the Casualty Team because he was a trained medic. If it hadn't been for that, Special Ed would have cut his strings a long time ago. But with a guy like Special Ed, necessity and proficiency as Mass Casualty Team leader and putting on a fine productive company face were always far more important than trifling things like pride, dignity, or self-respect.

"Hey, Nicky," Horn said. "I heard somewhere that the NSF buried all those people from Kharkov right in the ice. That last year, they chopped 'em

out and took 'em to Colony for dissection or something. You hear that?"

Coyle smiled.

Special Ed just shook his head. The NSF would not be involved in such things. To him, The Program was a virgin in a pristine white confirmation dress with its legs duly crossed. To guys like Horn it was a bagged-out five-dollar whore.

Coyle kept out of it.

He had opinions on Colony Station like everyone else but he wasn't going to wade in the muddy waters of conspiracy like Locke and his UFO followers. But that didn't mean he didn't think there was something damn odd about Colony. It was a restricted area with perimeter guards and everything. And this in Antarctica of all places like maybe it was Area 51 or something and they had to keep people away.

What people?

This was Antarctica for chrissake.

It was weird. Coyle had never been there and he supposed very few actually had. But everyone claimed to know all about it. Colony had only existed for the past two years. Like Clime, which had only been around for three, it was one of the newest American installations. But it was not like Clime. Though it was never admitted publicly, Colony was a military operation with armed guards and motion detectors and this at the bottom of the world. Go figure.

All Coyle knew for sure was that there was a posting on the board at Clime that forbid travel to or anywhere near Colony. And that was not only strange, it plain smelled bad.

And now, apparently, Colony had crashed a chopper.

Coyle didn't know what they were getting into here. At places like Clime, there were lots of little teams that had been thrown together, trained to deal with everything from fires to fuel spills to outbreaks of contagious diseases. Any problem that could conceivably occur at a remote outpost. The Mass Casualty Team was trained to deal with anything that involved bodies or wounded. That could be anything from a plane crash to a fire to a terrorist attack. Most of the drills were pretty ridiculous and it had been hard to take

them seriously, especially with Hopper running around blowing his whistle like a track coach.

No one seemed to know who came up with the scenarios, but they were something, all right: the tanks at the Fuel Depot rupturing, sending millions of gallons of diesel fuel and hi-test rushing at the station itself; the entire base going up in flames as a result of somebody cooking meth in their rooms; and, Coyle's favorite, the NBC drills where nuclear, biological, or chemical agents had been set loose at the station. This gave everyone a chance to don their Hazmat suits for decon operations. The suits were big and white and puffy, pumped full of air, and very hard to move around in with any grace. Your field of vision was strictly limited. There was nothing funnier than seeing eighteen or twenty people rushing around the compound tripping and bumping into each other, getting angry and pissed-off while Hopper blew his whistle, the lot of them looking like heavily-swaddled toddlers that had just learned to walk or marshmallow-shaped munchkins with absolutely no sense of balance.

Priceless.

But it was all part of the modern Antarctic experience and you had to love it.

Coyle had twelve years Ice-Time and he'd never actually seen a true accident. Nothing that couldn't be mopped up or swept into the dustbin. He'd seen violence, but that always involved one or two people. But worse things had happened down there on a large scale and more than once.

Back in 1979, a New Zealand flight loaded with over 200 tourists had crashed right into Mount Erebus. The aircraft broke up on impact, scattering bodies and flaming remains all over the mountainside and down into crevasses. Recovery teams came in from McMurdo and Scott Base and it was a real ugly mess. During the following weeks, charred corpses and limbs and torsos and decapitated heads were gathered up and zipped into plastic bags. Skua gulls—notorious scavengers that haunt the garbage heaps of the stations and eat anything from potato peelings to seal placentas and baby penguins—showed up in numbers for their share of the goodies, pecking through the plastic bags and feasting on what was inside. Something which drove members of the recovery teams into a blind rage.

Coyle had known a guy named Jerry Sherrily who had worked McMurdo back then and been part of the clean-up crew. It had been a nasty business. Remains were stored in the food freezers until they could be flown out. Sherrily said he would never forget the sound of the Skuas eating out of those bags or the sight of one flying over his head with a human hand in its beak. It was high summer at the time and as the bodies came in, they were stacked alongside the strip at Willy Field. The sun glaring down on them made them heat up and the bags kept breaking open as they were off-loaded from choppers, splashing rancid body fluids and gouts of tissue in the faces of the workers.

Coyle had seen some of the films of all that and he was remembering them now. Remembering every grisly detail and wondering just what in the hell he was getting himself into here.

First Mount Hobb losing its crew and now a chopper crash.

If these were omens for the coming winter, then they were not good ones.

6

THE CRASH SITE.

They saw the smoke from it long before they got in visual range.

Out on the polar plateau, if it was clear and cold, you could see for miles. But on a day like today with the sun barely making a showing and the snow blowing down from the mountains and that gloomy haze reflected up off the ice itself, visibility was down to twenty yards at best. It made it hard to tell which was the sky and which was the earth itself. It became one. Something that was only multiplied by the dimness of the dying early winter sunlight.

Horn piloted the Sno-Cat down the flagged ice road, the headlights jumping as they passed over humps and dips. The ice road was safe, but beyond its perimeters there were great jagged crevasse fields blown by ice-mist and glacial wind, meandering rows of scalloped sastrugi that looked like five-foot breakers heading ashore that had frozen in place. Back in the old days, Coyle knew, you had to rope your sledge to five or six men and drag it over obstacles like that, something that was accomplished only by straining brute strength and willpower. Even dog teams had a hell of a time.

"There . . . that's smoke out there," Special Ed said, jabbing his finger at the windshield. "See that?"

They all did, of course. Out in that unbroken glaring whiteness where even the shadows were pale gray, the black plumes of smoke boiling in the sky were in stark contrast. Frye's Sno-Cat was already at the scene when Horn downshifted and rolled them to a stop. He brought it around so the headlights were on the wreck like the other 'Cat. He left it running.

They strapped their Stabilicers on—extra soles with steel cleats on them that you strapped to your boots so you didn't slip and slide all over the place—and jumped out.

The crashed helicopter was a Huey.

It looked like some fluorescent orange wasp that had fallen to earth, been stepped on, and kicked to fragments by a precocious child: wings here and thorax there and abdomen over there. It was just a smoldering mess of iron and plastic and composite. Fuselage crushed and rotors snapped off, tail boom flattened and jutting up vertically now like an exclamation mark. The entire thing was burning, fuel tanks rupturing on impact and spraying gasoline in every which direction, creating a flaming wall that kept everyone away from the wreckage. The flames were burning out gradually, but it was still pretty hot and dangerous if you got too close.

Things were sputtering and popping. Now and again, a sizzling piece of metal broke free or was ejected by pressure and heat.

"Shit and shit," Coyle said.

"Oh boy, oh my God," Special Ed kept saying, circling around in his ECWs, bunny boots crunching on the hardpack.

Frye's team—which was composed of Frye, a kid they called Slim, and Flagg, the camp doctor—just stood there hopelessly, knowing there wasn't a damn thing they could do. The heat was melting the snow and ice, putting out a barrier that was hot like a breath from a kiln.

Frye just shook his head, unmoved by it all. "Sweet little mess, ain't she?" he said, spitting tobacco juice into the snow. "Jee-ZUZ-Christ, what a clusterfuck. Where'd this guy get his chopper license? Box of Cracker Jacks?"

Nobody commented on Frye's sensitivity to it all. That was Frye. Down deep, he was good as gold, but on the outside just plain crusty.

"So what're we supposed to do, Ed?" Horn was saying. "Whoever was on her is toast."

"Show some respect," Flagg said, the wind ruffling the fur of his parka.

Horn shrugged. "It's cool, Doc."

Frye spat another stream of tobacco juice at a smoking shard of metal. "He's right, though. Ain't nothing alive in that mess. Crew must be tater tots by now. Can't even see nothing in there that looks like a man. Unless you got a big spatula to flip 'em over with, ain't shit we can do."

"That's enough," Flagg said. "Good God, there were men on board."

"Ain't no men there now, Doc. Whatever was on board is bacon fried real crispy."

"Dude, that's cold," Slim said.

"I want your opinion, sunshine, I'll ask for it," Frye told him.

Slim was a General Assistant, a GA, which meant he pulled any shit job that came along. And this was beginning to look like one of those.

Coyle stood there, the heat coming off the wreckage so intense that he could have stripped down to a t-shirt and shorts. As it was, he was sweating in his heavy ECWs, his Extreme Cold Weather gear. He backed away, smelling acrid fumes of burning fuel and scorched metal, less pleasant odors that he figured were probably human flesh and bone. The wind shifted and blew smoke right into everyone's faces. Coughing and fanning the air, they stepped further back.

"Must've come down damn hard," Frye said. "Looks like she went nose first right into the ice. That's funny."

"Why?" Slim wanted to know.

"Because, kid, it ain't right. I've seen chopper crashes out here before. What usually happens is that the pilot has mechanical failure or whiteout conditions confuse him and he skims the ice. Either way, the chopper comes in horizontally with the ice, see? Follows the plane. This one looks like it was driven down vertically."

"Oh," Slim said, not getting it at all.

But Coyle was getting it and so were the others by the looks on their faces.

"You're right," Horn said, pulling off his hood and hat, wrapping an American flag bandanna over his sweating head which was steaming in the wind. "Looks like that pilot drove her straight down like a nail. Like maybe he did it on purpose."

Special Ed kept opening and closing his mouth like a fish trying to get a good pull of water through its gills. "Really, people, we don't know what happened here. It's not our place to speculate."

"Why not?" Horn said. "Why the hell not? If that chopper was from Colony, then you never know what kind of crazy-ass shit it was up to."

"That's right," Frye said. "Could be them Martians you hear about."

Slim giggled . . . then stopped when he saw no one thought that was funny. Not down here. Not on the Ice.

Coyle just watched the inferno.

The sight and smell and sound of that burning debris made something twist up in his belly like a screw seeking threads. It was horrible. The wreckage was scattered easily for two-hundred feet in all directions, fanning out from the central flaming mass. There were lots of charred things and smoking clumps everywhere. In the semi-darkness with the shadows thrown from the clouds of smoke, it was hard to tell much of anything.

Slim and Horn started ducking around the flames, checking things out while Special Ed told them to stay back, throwing his arms up into the air when they wouldn't listen.

Frye and Coyle sat on the treads of a Sno-Cat while Special Ed called it in on the radio and Flagg just stood there with his hands on his hips, his medical bag hanging from his waist.

There was a humming sound in the distance that got louder and louder until it became the telltale *thunk-thunk-thunk* of an approaching helicopter. It was coming in fast.

"Another chopper," Frye said. "And I can just about guess where it's coming from."

Coyle did not move. He just watched Horn and Slim playing amongst the burning wreckage like boys, kicking smoking shards of metal around and leaping over blackened sections of the chopper itself.

"Fuck is that?" Horn said. "That a body?"

"A couple of 'em," Slim said. "I think."

Flagg was interested now.

He moved around the perimeter of the wreckage, trying to get a look at what they'd found.

Both of them sounded excited. Even Horn who got excited about nothing but the idea of anarchy. Flagg was sixty-years old and he was in no

shape to be leapfrogging burning debris. He held a hand to his face to shield the smoke and heat.

Frye just shrugged, disinterested.

But Coyle was interested. He went over there and jogged around the far side. The sound of the approaching helicopter was getting really loud now.

"Look at that," Horn said. "A body, all right."

Coyle saw it. Looked like a man all twisted-up, mangled. He was burning and the stink was nauseating.

A section of the tail fell right over on top of him and he was completely engulfed in flame.

"Damn," Slim said.

"Something else over here," Horn said.

They darted around behind the wreckage, trying to get at something near a flaming section of tail stabilizer. Something large and oblong. It was covered in a tarp that was smoldering, flames burning around its edges. Whatever was under it was steaming like it was frozen and melting very fast.

"Is that a man over there?" Flagg said.

"Can't tell," Horn called out.

In an act of bravado born of youth and inexperience, Slim leaped the stabilizer and tried to get at the tarped form. Smoke was in Coyle's eyes, so he could not really see what was going on. Just Slim trying to yank that burning tarp away and commenting on the stink coming from underneath it.

"Be careful!" Flagg called out.

Horn was peering into the smoke as Slim took hold of the edge of the tarp and gave it a quick yank with his mittened hand. He pulled his hand away quickly.

"Ow! Ow! That shit is hot!"

"Something under there," Horn said. "Something big and it ain't no man."

Slim tried again and managed to pull it away and as he did so, he stumbled and fell back like whatever was under there had scared him.

"Goddamn!" he said, the tarp falling back into place. "You see that, Horn? You see that fucking thing under there?"

There was a sudden explosion and a fireball leaped from the wreckage, casting a wall of sparks over at Slim. Horn grabbed hold of him and yanked him away as burning bits flew free and sizzled in the snow like shrapnel.

Special Ed was hanging out of the cab of his 'Cat with the mic still in his hand. "Get away from there! You two, get away from there right now!"

"Yeah," Frye said. "Johnny! Tommy! You quit playing with that burning helicopter! You might get your pants dirty or scuff your Sunday church shoes! Fucking kindergarten."

Horn and Slim raced away from the wreckage and Slim's face was pinched white, his eyes huge. He didn't look frightened, really, but shocked.

Then the other helicopter buzzed overhead, hovered, and dropped down far behind the remains of the first, its rotor wash sending smoke and snow in every which direction.

"Hell you see over there?" Flagg called out to Slim over the noise of the chopper.

But Slim kept shaking his head and Horn kept licking his lips like maybe there wasn't enough spit in the world to lubricate his tongue so he could tell what he saw.

Something was up.

And Coyle figured it was more than just a charred body. This was something else. Something bad.

Three men came out of the chopper and they were all dressed in military-issue olive drab wind pants and parkas and snow goggles. They were big men and they carried sidearms. Two of them formed a perimeter at the wreckage like they were daring anyone to get too close. The other guy jogged over near the Sno-Cats.

"Here come the spooks," Horn said under his breath.

"We have a crash team en route from Colony," the guy said beneath a thick black mustache that looked like a particularly large and hairy spider that was trying to mate with his mouth. "We'll take care of it from here on in. Thanks for getting here so soon."

Flagg said, "The site is very hot, but we saw no survivors. The remains are trapped inside, I'm guessing."

"That's fine," mustache said. "We can handle it from here. You guys can pull out now. We have it well in hand."

In other words, Coyle thought, thanks and now get the hell out of here.

"We'll hang around to see if we can be of assistance," Flagg said.

"That's not necessary. We can handle this."

Special Ed hopped off the Sno-Cat. "Captain Dayton! How nice to see you again! We got here as fast as we could, but I think we were a little too late as you can see from the wreckage. My God, what a tragedy, what a terrible–"

Dayton ignored him. "I want this area cleared."

"Wait a minute now," Flagg said, getting his gumption up. "This is a crash site with fatalities. My assistance will be required."

Dayton narrowed his eyes. "Your assistance is not required."

Coyle was watching the exchange, but he was also watching Horn and Slim. They both had the same pale wide-eyed look about them, their mouths pulled into gray pressed lines just as sharp as razor cuts. They looked like they'd both just looked through a window into Hell.

Coyle was also watching Dayton.

Flagg was arguing with him and Special Ed danced around the periphery trying to make peace like a good little wind-up company man.

Coyle didn't know who Dayton was, but he did not like him.

Just an inflexible, rigid military man with a pole shoved up his ass. He and his two troopers had the same crewcuts, the same pickle jar heads, the same winter-dead eyes. You could read guys like that just fine if you spent enough time around them like Coyle had back in his Navy days. Maybe Special Ed was an obedient yes sir/no sir bureaucratic doormat, but guys like Dayton were one step above all that. They got the order, they'd slit your throat.

"Okay everybody," Special Ed said. "Let's load up and head back."

"I don't think we should," Flagg said to him, never taking his eyes off of the good captain. "We scrambled and came out here almost ten miles from the station and we did that because it's standard procedure. And now this guy is trying to order us off. I think we better stay. I think something about this whole situation really stinks."

Suddenly, it got very quiet.

Dayton was bristling, not used to having his authority questioned.

Nobody was saying a thing and nobody was making to leave either. Dayton just stood there glaring with his dead eyes and Flagg gave it right back to him while Special Ed looked from man to man, wondering how he could defuse this and keep everyone happy.

But Flagg was right: this did stink.

There was something wrong about the whole situation and they all knew it. Coyle knew it and it was sitting on him very wrong. Dayton was coming on far too strong for a simple helicopter wreck. He was acting like a flying saucer had crashed and he didn't want anybody stealing the little green men.

Dayton looked at Special Ed and Special Ed looked like he needed to piss real bad. "You will get your people out of here right now. Do you understand me?"

Special Ed was nodding his head so frantically it looked like it might fall right off.

Then Frye stood up. "No, sorry, chief, we're not leaving. There's something shitty in the old horsebarn and I plan on finding out what. These boys here—" he motioned towards Horn and Slim "—they found something under a tarp over there, something that must have been thrown clear of your chopper and I wanna know what."

Dayton took a step forward, brushing Special Ed aside. "What is under that tarp is Colony business."

"Sorry, chief. I think otherwise." He turned to Horn and Slim. "Now tell me, boys, what did you see under there? Don't worry about this jarhead. He has no jurisdiction here."

Horn wisely kept his mouth shut, smelling something on Dayton he did not like.

Slim just shrugged, that same shell-shocked look on his face. "I don't know . . . it was big and weird and ugly," he said, having trouble framing it into words. "It wasn't a man . . . it was some kind of *thing*."

"You hear that, chief?" Frye said. "It was some kind of fucking thing. Now you want to tell us what kind of cargo that chopper was carrying or do we wait around until things cool and find out for ourselves?"

Special Ed looked like there was something stuck in his throat he could not swallow down.

Coyle stepped forward because he knew that Frye was incapable of backing down from any man. Problem was, Dayton was the same type. Only he had a gun.

"Again, what is under that tarp is Colony business," Dayton insisted. "Now, please, sir, leave the area. I won't ask you again."

Frye grinned, all working class attitude. "And if I refuse? You gonna pull that gun on me, junior? You got three boys and I got a good spit more. I'm thinking we'll cornhole your merry ass three ways to Sunday if you try."

"Okay," Special Ed said, "that's enough."

Coyle figured it was, too.

He got in-between Frye and Dayton and pulled Frye away, leading him over to the 'Cat while Frye bitched the whole way, saying how there was one thing in this world he hated and that was uppity little Annapolis jarheads sucking government root. Frye cast Dayton a hard look and got into the 'Cat. Flagg followed and Special Ed went with them like he didn't trust those two not to get out again and make trouble.

"C'mon," Coyle told Horn and Slim who were just standing there in the wind. "Get in the fucking 'Cat."

They moved now like they'd been slapped, climbing up into the cab.

Coyle jumped up on the treads and took one last look at Dayton and his toy soldiers. No, this was all wrong. This whole scenario was spooky and strange. First Mount Hobb and then this crash and now Dayton with his James Bond shit. Not good, not good at all.

As Coyle cranked up the 'Cat and got it moving, he cast one last look at the burning wreckage and that singed tarped form. Then he looked at Horn

and Slim.

They stared at him without blinking.

7

WILLIAMS FIELD,
ROSS ICE SHELF,
WEST ANTARCTICA

IN THE DYING LIGHT, Kephart watched the Caterpillar loaders hauling crated skids of machine parts, lab equipment, food, and construction supplies over to the DC-3 which sat on the snow runway. The wind coming in off the Ross Sea had a glacial bite to it today but it was nothing in comparison to the weather where the DC-3 was going: the edge of East Antarctica, right in the shadow of the mountains. A place called Colony Station that was getting a really spooky reputation. Kephart never paid much attention to the gossip.

Ever since the Kharkov Tragedy there was a lot of bullshit in the wind down here on the Ice.

He kept his nose clean and concentrated on why he was here and the job he had to do. He walked through the wind to the staging area where the cargo was stacked. It was all here on his inventory list and that's the way Kephart liked it.

Everything by the book, every bolt, every 2 x 4, every carton of liquid eggs and every frozen steak accounted for.

So when he found something that was not accounted for, he was not happy.

Sitting on wooden pallets were six silver aluminum-skinned boxes that looked very much like coffins, except they were about eight feet long.

Kephart went over his inventory five times by penlight. Nope, nope, and nope.

The ANG pilot was standing there, checking his watch, anxious to get in the air. He was smoking a cigarette, back to the wind.

Kephart went over to him. “Lieutenant,” he said. “What are these silver containers? They are not on my inventory.”

The lieutenant stared at him through ice goggles, blowing smoke. He pulled out his inventory sheet. “Well, they’re on mine.” He paged through it. “Right here. Six aluminum BCVs. Biological Containment Vessels.”

“Well, why the hell aren’t they on my list?”

“I don’t know. You better ask the loadmaster about that. And tell him to move it along, I want to get airborne here.”

Kephart just stood there. “What the hell are those things for?”

“Biological specimens,” he said. “We’ve flown ‘em out to Colony before.”

“Look like coffins,” Kephart said.

The lieutenant looked off across the ice. “I learned never to ask questions about Colony Station. Things are simpler that way. Maybe they are coffins, but as far as I’m concerned they’re BCVs. That’s good enough for me.”

“What do you suppose they use them for?”

But the lieutenant would only smile.

8

POLAR CLIME STATION

WHEN THEY GOT BACK, the first thing Coyle did was to take Horn and Slim aside in the Heavy Shop and put it to them like this: "You guys want trouble, then just go ahead and write up what you saw out there. Write down what you saw or what you *think* you saw. That's how to go about it."

They both just stared at him.

He pulled off his hat and slapped it against his leg. "Listen, guys. I don't know what you saw and I don't think you really do either. Whatever is was, forget about it, okay? That Dayton guy is bad news. He's the sort that can make real trouble for both of you. Special Ed will make you write it all up. It's SOP. Just leave out the business about what was under the tarp. You don't and Hopper'll be all over you. You know how he is. He can't handle things like this. All he knows is teamwork and group effort."

"Dude," Slim said, pulling off his own hat and exposing his brightly dyed yellow spiky locks, "we can't lie on that report. Man, I need this job. I need the money. I got a kid back home and shit. If I lie on that, I won't get my bonus and I'll never get to come back."

Horn lapsed into his usual cynicism. "And that's a bad thing?"

Coyle ignored him. "If you report some *thing* under a tarp, you're screwed. Trust me. The NSF doesn't want the truth of what goes on down here just like Special Ed doesn't. They want neat, tidy things in their reports. Things that make sense. Things that they can fit snug in their briefcases when they ask for more funding. That's how The Program works. That's how it's always worked. Bullshit is a way of life. Embrace it."

Horn didn't say a thing.

With five years Ice Time, he knew Coyle was right. Absolutely right. But Slim kept saying that Special Ed was there. He'd ask questions if they left out

the bit about the thing under the tarp. But Coyle assured him that Special Ed would not. What they needed to do was make no mention of that thing and no mention that Dayton was acting like some spook hiding little green men.

"Okay . . . what *do* we say then?" Slim asked.

"Just say that you saw a body. No speculation. You saw a body, but it was burning and you couldn't get to it. Then the team from Colony arrived, said they could handle it, and we left."

"Bet Doc's not gonna log it like that," Horn said.

Coyle shrugged. "No, he probably won't. But Doc's got a cousin who's married to a fucking congressman from Illinois. They wouldn't dare mess with him. Special Ed will probably edit Doc's report. So save him the trouble and edit yours yourself. It'll save you bullshit. Save your job. And save you from a nasty post-season psych eval with the witch doctors from McMurdo."

Slim seemed to be okay with it now.

Horn, too.

Sometimes, with his years down here, Coyle felt like he was everyone's favorite uncle. While other Polies liked to watch Fingees—Fucking New Guys—stumble about and get themselves into all kinds of trouble and took a truly perverse enjoyment from it, Coyle liked to watch over them. Steer them straight. Help them out. Do anything so they wouldn't become the sort of bitter, fucked-up, neurotic types that infested the stations. The sort that filed grievances because you were drinking too much milk or using too much soap or accused you of pissing in the showers and making obscene gestures behind their backs or went absolutely berserk because somebody ate the last box of Jujyfruits.

And with what Horn and Slim saw . . . well, it went without saying that you just had to leave that out or you were inviting trouble like nobody's business. The NSF did not want to be hearing about things under tarps. Not in the least. Not after Kharkov and what may or may not have been brewing with that British station, Mount Hobb.

"What about that thing, Nicky?" Slim said. "It wasn't a man."

"Looked kind of alien to me," Horn said.

Coyle just gave him a look that shut him up.

After he loaded Horn and Slim into the Sno-Cat and got them away from the crash site, they just kept staring at him. They wanted to tell him. They wanted him to know about what they had seen and he knew it. Maybe it was his years on the Ice or his cool head and easy manner, but Coyle was often the repository of secrets and confessions at the stations. People told him things they did not tell their wives or husbands. They admitted things that the NSF would not approve of and bared their souls to him, purged all the dark things. Maybe he should have been a therapist. Regardless, he never repeated what he heard and he always tried to help whoever did the confessing. That was his way.

So, a couple miles down the road, he pulled the Sno-Cat to a stop and said, "Go ahead, boys, tell me what was under the tarp."

Horn wasn't sure, not really, just something weird that he could not properly identify. And he admitted as much. Maybe he didn't want to say.

Slim had no such compunction. He gripped Coyle's arm through his parka, said, "Nicky, it was freaky, man. I mean, it was just . . . *freaky*. I never seen nothing like that before."

"Take it easy, kid. Just tell me."

So Slim did.

He said when he yanked the tarp back he got a quick look at something big that was nearly encased in ice. Kind of an oblong gray body with sort of a head attached to it. Something like a head. A drab yellow thing that looked like a frozen starfish with all its legs extended stiffly and at the end of each of those legs, there was a red eye about the size of golf ball. Perfectly round and perfectly red.

"I saw it," he maintained. "I saw it and I don't care what anybody says. I just saw it for a second, but it was there, dude, it was there."

"Take it easy," Horn told him, looking a little pale himself. "We believe you. That's the kind of thing I saw, too, Nicky. I'm not shitting you."

"Okay, okay. I believe you saw it. I don't know what the hell it could be, but I believe you," Coyle told them. "Now put it out of your minds."

Then they drove back to Clime.

The whole way no one said a word. There were things Coyle could have said, but why? Why go into all that? Why resurrect those old tales that had been making the rounds on the Ice for years now? Maybe they saw something and maybe they just thought they did.

Coyle had heard stories like theirs before.

Six, seven years before he'd been down at McMurdo one autumn as winter was approaching. He'd signed on to winter-over so he was helping load up the planes, pack everyone's gear up. A deep-field team came in late and they had to hurry them on an outgoing C-130 Win-Fly that was taking everyone back to Christchurch, New Zealand. The whole lot of them, geologists and paleontologists, were acting pretty spooky. One of them, a paleobotanist named Dr. Monroe from the Chicago Field Museum, was acting spookier than the rest.

His colleagues actively avoided him.

Coyle learned that they were coming back in late because Monroe had gotten lost overnight. Coyle had been pretty friendly with him, so he asked him what that had been like, lost up on the mountain alone.

Monroe looked at him with eyes like open wounds.

He said it was bad.

So bad that he would never, ever come back to Antarctica again. He was out examining some sediments from the Carboniferous Period, he said, in a little valley and an ice-fog trapped him. He couldn't see five feet in any direction. He'd had field survival training, so he didn't panic. He looked for shelter and found it: a little ice cave that was drifted over. He put out a black flag so a search team would know where he was and got out of the elements. He crawled down into the ice cave with his light and right away saw something frozen in the ice above him.

Old ice, he said, crystal blue and clear.

Ice that was 200,000 years old if it was a day.

He didn't know what he was seeing, but it was big and oblong-shaped and it had a head. A head with these stout yellow stalks with red eyes at the end of each. Eyes that were bright red, just staring at him. Monroe said that he lost his mind in that cave. That he was certain those stalks were crawling

like worms and those vivid red eyes were watching him. Not dead, but horribly alive, looking at him and *into* him, getting inside his head and making him think things. He had to spend the entire night in that cave with that thing looking at him and it had aged him twenty years.

That's what he told Coyle before he hopped that plane and got out of there like a man that was being hunted. A month later, stateside, Monroe put a gun in his mouth and ended it. Maybe what he had seen—or claimed to have seen—stayed with him, haunted his dreams and waking moments. Regardless, it was enough.

Coyle had never told anyone about that and he didn't intend to now either.

Standing there in the Heavy Shop, he brought Horn and Slim around, telling them how it had to be, how they had to leave it out of their reports and keep their mouths shut about it all. There was no other way.

Slim finally left, but his eyes were very familiar: they looked just like Monroe's.

Horn stayed. "I'm gonna do what you say, Nicky."

"That swise."

"Uh-huh. They're up to shit that's no good at Colony, you know? Real bad things and I don't like it. I been hearing things same as you have, Nicky. Now I'm not Locke. I don't believe in ghosties and ghoulies and all that. Mostly, I don't believe in anything. Not even myself. But what Dayton and those other assholes are up to is just plain no good."

"We don't know what they're up to."

"No, we don't. Not really." He shrugged, dismissing it. "Now I like you, Nicky. You're okay. We all think you're okay. But don't pretend with me, man, all right? There's shit going on over at Colony that's dangerous. They're messing with things we ain't got no right fooling with. There. I said it. We don't have no business with those things frozen down in the ice. You can say all that Kharkov bullshit is just that . . . *bullshit,* but you know better and I know better and so do a lot of people down here. We ain't got no business with those things. Maybe coming down here is the worst thing we ever did.

We're better off leaving the past in the past because sometimes ghosts bite. And that's all I'm gonna say. Catch you later, Nicky."

Well, that was a mouthful for Horn.

He was generally moody, silent and watchful. When he did speak, his words were usually couched in cynicism and sarcasm. He had faith in nothing or no one. For him to say what he said was pretty much baring his soul.

Coyle didn't want to think anymore.

He didn't want to think about Kharkov or Mount Hobb or things under tarps. All he wanted was for things to be like normal. Boring and ordinary. That was plenty and this year he had a feeling that it was simply asking for too damn much.

9

BEACON VALLEY,
SENTINEL MOUNTAINS,
QUEEN MAUD RANGE

A NECROPOLIS.

A city of the dead.

That's what the megalithic site discovered in the Beacon Valley looked like at first glance: a sprawling tombyard of stark immensity. Intersecting and crossed and fused together, a shadowy and morbid tangle of perverse gigantism, reaching and crumbling.

It was a sepulchral place filled with crawling shadows and disembodied voices from lost epochs.

There was something undeniably ethereal and almost ghostly about the high jagged expanses of the glaciers that towered above it. The black-striated mountain peaks of the Sentinel Group that rose above Beacon Valley in gigantic cones and razor-backed precipices. Poking up through ribbons of coiling mist and suspended ice clouds at the very eastern edge of the Queen Maud Range, some fifteen miles west of Mount Hobb Research Station, they looked like the conical ruins of some lost, nameless civilization. Above the ice and snow, they were stark and ominous and inexplicably forbidding. As if every whispered secret of the planet was locked up in them like some dark chest of unknown wonders.

And maybe there was some truth to that.

For it was in the ice-sculpted, wind-blown glacial valley below that the mysterious megaliths were first discovered by British geologists the autumn before.

An unprecedented trough of warm air had kissed Beacon Valley, melting several hundred feet of ancient ice and exposing the pinnacles of the megaliths themselves. At first, the scientists thought they were looking at the

flattened, sheered-off tops of some petrified prehistoric forest, much like the fossilized Permian stands found at the Beardmore Glacier area some years before.

But these were artificial in origin and the impact of that was said to have put more than one of the team down on their knees. For this was Antarctica, not Europe. And the ice that covered these particular standing stones dated from the Miocene at the very least and the implications of that, they knew, threatened not only the culture of mankind, but accepted history itself. These were not Neolithic or Paleolithic in origin, but from a time so distant that man's earliest ancestors had yet to evolve from the stew of creation.

And what did that say?

What did that conceivably hint at?

Over the next month, using hot-water drills and suction pumps, the megaliths were slowly exposed for the first time in over twenty-million years. They towered above at least a hundred feet and using ice-penetrating sonar, it was discovered that there was at least another hundred feet of them encased in the ice.

As winter came on and the temperature dipped and the winds screamed through the Sentinels, all work was abandoned until the following spring.

And there was more than one of the scientists that were only too happy to be away from that awful place. Maybe it was the way the wind howled at night around their tents or the strange almost musical piping that drifted down from the high peaks like Pan's flute across a grim harvest field or the terrible dreams the standing stones inspired.

Dreams that no one would dare confess by daylight.

Perhaps it was all these things and perhaps something more. For there was no denying that those primal-hewed stones had a certain magnetism to them. That they made you want to stare at them. To touch them and feel them under your fingertips, feel the arcane and primordial energy thrumming through them. To go down on your knees before them like a mindless savage at the altar of his god.

They were hypnotic, morphic.

To look upon them was to remember dreadful things long forgotten. To touch them was to be owned by them and those that had erected them.

And the one thing that no one would dare admit was that the megaliths looked oddly *familiar.* As if they had seen them in dreams or half-glimpsed memories, the aberrant architecture of some surreal nightscape that haunted their every waking moment. You could not look upon those structures without feeling something, a certain *awareness* in the back of your mind, a primeval blackness rising up from the base of your skull that threatened to drown all that you were and ever would be.

For there was memory in those stones.

Bleak, anti-human, and unpleasantly vital.

So the site was abandoned amidst much fervor in the popular press, much recrimination and denial in organized religious circles, and much more revelation and soul-searching amongst the world population in general.

About the same time that Mount Hobb Station was emptied of human life, something incredible was happening there: the ice was continuing to melt. Though the temperatures had dropped to ten below zero and the winds screamed down from the high elevations in tempests of raging snow, the megaliths continued to rise from the retreating ice.

No one was there to see it.

No one human, at any rate.

Some unknown heat was directed at the site and the megaliths slowly revealed their superannuated secrets. It took but six days.

Beacon Valley was melted right down to the ancient volcanic rock below. Though no one knew it yet, the site had once sat upon a hilltop during the Cretaceous, but molten lava beds forced up from below under unbelievable pressure—creating the Sentinel Mountains themselves—had drawn the megalith site down into the valley in which it now sat.

By the time of the chopper crash near Polar Clime, the megaliths were completely free of the ice that had swallowed them. Though outlying areas had collapsed to ruins or been ground down into the earth by the glaciers themselves over that unimaginable gulf of time, the majority of the

structures still stood. High and imposing and insane, spread over half a mile, they were a geometric anomaly that taxed the human brain just to look upon them.

From high above, if you were to have seen them from an airplane, you would have noticed not a jumble of stones, but a symmetry that was disturbing. For despite the passage of eons, the megaliths were laid out in precise, almost mathematical order in the form of no less than five intersecting and exaggerated five-pointed stars. A cabalistic pentagram.

At ground level, however, there seemed to be no cohesion whatsoever.

Just a cyclopean, debased collection of crumbling cairns and massive pillar-like free-standing trilithons and sarsen stones arranged in concentric, ever-widening circles that were capped and connected by the horizontal shafts of great lintel stones overhead. And amongst this clustered, alien profusion, overlapping monuments and heel-stones, rectangular dolmens and cromlechs rising above deep-hewn barrow tunnels and oblong chambers and tabletop slabs carved with figures and forms unlike any to be seen anywhere on earth. It was all set upon upraised stone platforms of varying height which themselves were cut through by irregular trench systems and linked, yawning ditches.

All of it was weathered and pitted and standing slightly off-center and leaning as if it might fall at any moment. But it did not fall. It had withstood the turbulence of the ages—extreme climactic change, seismic upheaval, and advanced glaciation—and would stand until its purpose was fulfilled, exactly as it had been designed. And although it was like other megalithic sites in that it was decidedly ritualistic by design, it was not a calendar or an astronomical observatory nor a rudimentary computer as some suggested anymore than was Stonehenge of Salisbury Plain or the Carnac Stones of Brittany.

Like them, it was a machine.

A dire machine awaiting to be activated.

And the time for that was coming very soon.

10

COLONY STATION,
HORSEHEAD BASIN,
MONOLITH RANGE
FEBRUARY 22nd

WHEN BUTLER AGAIN WOKE up, she was strapped to a table, fluorescent lights shining so bright in her face she had to squint her eyes.

Someone was standing there, hovering over her.

An elderly woman with a wrinkled, dead face, a cruel smile on her lips sharp as a paper cut.

Doctor... Doctor... Relling... this is Doctor Relling...

"You're awake, I see," the woman said.

Butler mumbled something, her head aching, every inch of her flesh raw and hurting. Relling was doing something and then she saw what: she was injecting a syringe into her arm.

"There," she said. "Now we'll talk. Calmly. Easily. Like two old friends, eh?"

Butler fought against the straps, crying out, thrashing this way and that . . . and then the will to do anything was just gone. She was on a cloud. She drifted. She breathed. She blinked. Nothing else.

Finally, she said, "Please . . . I just want to go home."

"Of course you do," Relling told her. "I'll try and help you with that, but first you have to help me. You do want to help me, don't you?"

Something in Butler's mind screamed *No!,* but her lips parted and she simply said: "Yes."

Despite herself, Butler felt relaxed. The pain was distant. She liked the sound of Relling's voice.

"You were at Mount Hobb. You were sleeping," Relling said. "You awoke to find the station empty. Then they came for you."

Butler tensed, tears washing down her cheeks. "No, no . . . I was alone . . . I was just alone . . ."

(the shadow on the wall)

(the shadow growing and growing . . . the flapping of wings... the slithering of limbs . . . the eyes . . . the red eyes . . .)

"It came for you. The creature took you."

Butler shook her head, but once again her lips betrayed her: "It touched me . . . oh God . . . it *touched me . . .*"

(not a shadow . . . it had form, thickness, solidity)

(it stank of ammonia and cold, airless wastes . . . its touch was like ice)

(the buzzing . . . the buzzing of its voice)

(butler . . . butler)

"It touched you. Then it took you somewhere."

Butler's breath came very fast. "I couldn't fight it. I tried to fight it . . . but it looked at me and I couldn't move."

"Where did it take you?"

Butler stared off into space. "Through the wall. Where the angles meet. It took me through the wall."

(through the wall . . . darkness and space, black gutters of time and filth and nonentity . . . the great white space and the black corridor . . . the primal emptiness . . . the spheres of shadow . . . the anti-world)

"And where did you go?" Relling said.

Butler was shaking despite the injection, just trembling and sweating, eyes huge and fixed, filled with cloying shadows. Her hands bunched in and out of fists. But she could remember, she could see that place, that void of darkness in which glowing geometrical shapes crawled and were alive, viscidly alive.

"That place . . . we flew into that place . . . into that dark place . . ."

"What did you see?"

"The city . . . I saw the city! *It floats, black and endless!* Towers and pillars and pyramids made of black crystal . . . full of holes . . . holes . . . so many holes . . ."

"What was in the city?"

"Them . . . those things like at Hobb . . . the Kharkov things! Flying and hopping . . . up into the sky and down into the holes below! I was with them! I was *part* of them! We were the hive! We were the hive! The eyes! The eyes!"

Relling gripped her arm. "Tell me about the eyes."

Butler was moaning now, tears running down her cheeks. "The eyes . . . the million eyes! *The million million eyes!*"

(the teeming numbers . . . hopping and creeping and filling the spaces)

"What do the eyes do? What do they do?"

"No! No! Nooooo! Not the eyes that burn and see!"

"Tell me!"

"NO! I CANNOT SAY! I WILL NOT TALK OF THE EYES–"

The table Butler was strapped to began to vibrate and there was a sudden sharp, chemical odor in the air which had dropped thirty degrees in the span of seconds. Noises began to echo . . . slitherings and scratchings, pipings and squeals. The plasterboard wall shook and a great crack ran through it. The lights overhead flickered, went off.

"THE EYES! THE MILLION EYES OF THEM!"

(the hive)

(THE HIVE)

(THE WITCH-SWARM)

And then as Relling watched with a clinical eye, shapes began to bleed from the walls, spreading their wings, their eyes lit a malefic electric red. They filled the room in ghost trains. Then faded.

Butler was unconscious.

Relling went back to her office, wiping a dew of sweat from her brow. She thumbed the intercom. "Has the package been delivered to Polaris yet?"

"It's not ready. Tomorrow for sure."

Relling sighed. “All right. But no later, no later.”

Sitting behind her desk, she listened to the wind moaning through the compound.

11

POLAR CLIME STATION,
FEBRUARY 23rd

OFFICIALLY AT CLIME, NICKY Coyle was a DA, a Dining Attendant, but he was no common DA and nobody thought of him as such. DAs loaded dishwashers and emptied garbage, made pitchers of Kool-Aid and pots of coffee, cleaned up the dining area and scrubbed pots.

Coyle was no DA; he was a chef.

Just ask anyone at Clime, and particularly when they were hungry.

During his twelve-year tenure in Antarctica, he'd done just about everything. He'd worked Waste and Supply, been a heavy equipment operator and a mechanic. He'd been a meteorologist's assistant. A medic. Worked the power plant and radio room. But he'd always liked cooking best. It was in his blood. When you were a chef and a good one, you were always golden at any far-flung outpost. Having tasty meals and desserts available made the desolation go down that much easier for the crews, most of which were punchy and homesick by mid-winter or midsummer for that matter. It was hard work sometimes, but if you loved it there was nothing like it. When everyone else was relaxing and enjoying themselves, you were working. But that was okay.

That winter at Clime, there were three people working the Galley: Coyle, Ida LaRue, and the ill-named Bonnie Beaver, who everyone simply called "The Beav." The Beav was the Galley Supervisor. It was a job Coyle could have had if he wanted, but he didn't. When you were a supervisor—and every section had one, even when there was only one person in that particular section—you were responsible for everything. In the Galley, that meant every carton of liquid eggs and every slab of frozen dough and every packet of salt had to be accounted for.

It paid better, but it was bullshit.

So Coyle did the cooking and The Beav did the supervising and Ida pretty much sat on her ass until The Beav jumped her shit and made her set tables or load the dishwasher or do any of the other countless menial tasks that Ida was assigned as a lower-rung DA.

Ida was okay.

She was in her late fifties and looked seventy, something she owed to Wild Turkey and a disastrous series of marriages that she would gladly tell you about in detail. Pity was Ida's thing.

The Beav wasn't much younger.

She was an old hippie that liked to talk about seeing Jimi at Monterey and The Who at Woodstock, love-ins and crash-pads and the groovy days of dropping acid on Haight-Ashbury and seeing Joplin and the Jefferson Airplane in small clubs that barely held thirty people.

When he was cooking, Coyle liked the quiet, to be alone with his thoughts. Ida wanted country music and The Beav preferred the Mothers of Invention or Moby Grape, maybe a little Grass Roots or some Zombies.

After the whole crash site business, Coyle decided he would wash it all from his mind by getting drunk or cooking.

He chose the latter.

As the wind blew and the dome rocked, he was layering lasagna noodles in industrial-sized stainless steel pans while his sauce simmered on the stove. Coyle never used hamburger. Only Italian sausage. And always fresh ricotta, not cottage cheese like his mother. That woman had been some kind of cook, but raising seven kids on a cop's salary she'd learned all about short-cuts and stretching dollars.

"You hear that wind?" Ida said, paging through a copy of *Soap Opera Digest* that was two years out of date. "Sounds like it's gonna come right through them walls after us. That goddamn wind."

Coyle just nodded. "You feel like lending a hand here, Ida, you let me know."

"The mind's willing, but the body's another matter, Nicky. My back is paining me something awful today." She flipped through a few pages. "I shouldn't even be down here, but I needed the money. I should be home,

way my back is. Ever since my second husband, Winky O'Dell, threw me down those stairs fifteen years ago, my back has been shit."

Coyle kept layering noodles and sauce and meat. "Why'd he throw you down the stairs, Ida?"

"He was drunk . . . or I was. I can't remember. He was Irish, though, and you know what kind of tempers those guys have." She found an article that interested her, kept clicking her tongue. "Listen to this, Nicky. Says here that they might bring back Billy Clyde Tuggle on *All my Children* . . . you believe that? That dirty sonofabitch. You remember him? He was a pimp over in Center City and Estelle and Donna worked for him. That was a long time ago. He came back that other time and threw his pregnant daughter down the stairs. Oh, I hated him. He was supposed to have drowned in that river. But they never stay dead on the stories. Next thing you know, they'll be bringing back Ray Gardener. Now there was some piece of work."

Coyle shut her out.

When she wasn't talking about her ex-husbands, she was jabbering on about her "stories" and the intertwined lives of soap opera characters. Coyle had never watched a soap opera in his life, but two weeks now with Ida and he felt like he knew all about Center City and Port Charles.

"Hey, Nicky," a voice said.

It was Harvey Smith, their radio operator that winter. Harvey was okay, just paranoid. Something Coyle figured would deepen as the winter drew on. He spent most of his time at the Transmission Shack, but when he wasn't monitoring communications he was whipping up conspiracies. Because everyone was against him and he knew it.

Coyle walked out of the Galley. "Hey, Harv."

Harvey was a short, chubby, balding man with an ugly disposition that made him an instant target. "They're at it again," he said.

"At what?"

Harvey peered around to see if *they* were listening. "You know. I got back to my room and they'd been in there again. They moved all my stuff around. Bastards even went through the drawers of my desk and put mother's picture

in the frame upside down. Now do I deserve that? I don't cause no trouble. I don't even talk to these people. Why do they go after me?"

"I don't know, Harv."

"I know why and so do you. They're *Masons.* They're all Freemasons. All of 'em. All part of that little cult with their secret meetings and robes and chanting. Masons. I hate Masons. They know I know about it."

"They can't all be Masons, Harv."

"Hopper is. People named Hopper always are. God, all winter I'm going to have to deal with this."

Coyle took him aside. "Here's what you need to do, Harv. Write it all down. Make lists of who you think the Masons are and what your proof is. But don't tell anyone. Just write it all down and make copies so they can't destroy all your evidence. Write all the things down they do to you."

Harvey brightened. "Yeah . . . yeah! That's a good idea."

"I think so."

"But be careful, Nicky. They know you and me aren't with 'em. They might get dangerous."

"I'll watch my back."

Harvey dropped him a wink now that they were in it together. He took off at a fast clip and Coyle sighed. Here he was yet again as the camp priest and therapist.

The Galley and dining area were traditionally the hub of any station in Antarctica. Central processing and dispatch for rumors and gossip, all the tiny infractions and abuses and gripes that came from all corners every single day. It was all aired in the Galley. Ida thrived on it. The Beav despised it. And Coyle was forced to tolerate it.

As he cooked, Hopper stopped by as he always did. "Mmm! Smells great, Nicky! Way to go!"

Thankfully, he kept right on going, seeming to move in every direction at once before deciding on the most direct route to wherever it was he needed to go. That was good. As Coyle sprinkled cheese over his pans of lasagna, he knew he just wasn't up to the station manager. He found Hopper fatiguing

on the best of days, let alone today. He was one of those hyperactive, energetic individuals that seemed to come at you like a full-force gale, wearing you down incrementally like wind eroding a hillside until you were stripped bare, a skeleton and little else.

Coyle made ready to slide his lasagna pans in the oven, but before he did that he took his fist and smacked the edge of the stainless steel counter to discharge the static electricity so he didn't get zapped. The air was so incredibly dry in Antarctica that static electricity built up continually. After you got zapped a few times, you learned to discharge it before grabbing a counter or a doorknob, just about anything.

"Hey, Nicky."

Sighing, shoving his pans in the oven, Coyle turned and Gwen Curie was standing there. Gwen was a tall and curvy brunette with an impressive bosom over which was stretched a sweatshirt that read: I WISH THESE WERE BRAIN CELLS.

"Hey, Gwen."

"What're you making me for supper?" she asked. "I've got savage appetites, you know."

"Lasagna."

"Italian sausage?" she asked, her big dark eyes practically smoldering.

"Yup."

She licked her lips and tossed her hair back. "Mama likes sausage. Especially when it's yours, Nicky." She winked. "Mama liked it a lot last night."

"Sssh," he said, smiling. "People will talk."

Gwen dipped a finger into the sauce and sucked it clean. "Mmm. You going to the Callisto Party? Should be a real roar. We're all getting together and drinking Yager Bombs first. Doc said we can dress his CPR dolls up like aliens long as we don't break them and he gets them back."

"I'll be there."

"Mama wants you at her side."

"Tell mama it's a date."

Gwen smiled and winked. “See ya,” she said and went on her way, swinging her hips in an exaggerated manner. So exaggerated that Frye once said that if you shoved a broom up her ass she could sweep the floors at the same time.

Theme parties.

They kept the herds sane during the winter, gave them something to look forward to and something to plan for.

Most of them—excuses for excessive drinking, really—could be as harmless as Greaser Night where everyone dressed like they’d just jumped out of the 1950’s or Hippie Night—The Beav was already pushing for that—or Punk Rock night. Or they could get quite a bit edgier and downright offbeat such as Casualty Night or Alien Abduction Night or Disenfranchised Youth Night. By the end of winter, when petty disagreements had boiled over into major resentments, you might have very negative theme parties like Hostility Night or Anger Management Night. By that point, most people stopped going and those that did were openly bitter and looking for a good fight or a reason simply to lash out. The HR people like Special Ed frowned on the latter, but rarely tried to stop them unless serious bloodshed was in the offing.

The Callisto Party was something special.

NASA, who was underwriting a lot of research at the stations, had decided to give the NSF’s Antarctic personnel a prime opportunity: the chance to be the first to peek through the window of interplanetary space at another world. To see what it looked like at the very same moment the scientists and technicians at NASA and Houston and the JPL would be seeing it. Not a delayed and censored feed like the sort that would be given to CNN and the other global news networks. But a *live* feed. Or as live of a feed as can be hoped for from a world nearly 400 million miles from Earth.

The Cassini 3 unmanned spacecraft had left Earth some fourteen months previous for a rendezvous with the planet Jupiter. Its purpose was to drop probes onto the Jovian moons Europa and Io, Ganymede and Callisto, all of which were suspected of having warm oceans beneath their icy crust. And tomorrow, the first of those probes would descend and transmit live images back to Earth.

Its target was Callisto.

NASA would be feeding the images directly to Armed Forces Antarctic Network-McMurdo as they received them.

It was going to be a big night.

The first TV broadcast from another world.

What better reason to get roaring drunk?

Coyle peered out of the Galley door, looking around the Community Room. They crew was lounging and chatting, tapping away on laptops and playing cards.

It was going to be a strange winter and he felt that right to his bones. Mount Hobb. The thing under the tarp. Those weirdies from Colony. And tomorrow night, a live feed from one of the moons of Jupiter. Coyle didn't know why, but the idea of that scared the shit out of him.

12

THAT NIGHT, FRYE SKUNKED him four times running at cribbage and cleaned him out at five-card, taking forty bucks in the process. Frye was good at poker, at cribbage. In games that seemed to depend entirely on the luck of the draw, his draw was invariably the luckiest. But usually Coyle put up a fight. He brought something to the table. But tonight he was distracted and he came away with empty pockets. When he suggested another game, maybe seven-card or Rummy, Frye just shook his head.

"I'll own your ass at this rate, Nicky. Now I don't mind you dropping by and giving me your money and drinking my whiskey, but maybe it's time you pull your head out of your ass and tell me what's on your mind. Because there's something and I know it."

"You do, eh?"

"Sure. You got a size ten bug up your ass and I say we pull it out and squish it. You're nursing my good booze. Your card-playing sucks. And you won't let me play any happy music."

Coyle just smiled. No, he wasn't much company tonight. That was true. He couldn't concentrate on the game. The whiskey didn't want to go down. And he couldn't tolerate music. Frye's musical tastes began with Duane Eddy and ended with Gene Vincent. Nothing wrong with rockabilly, but not tonight.

"Let's have it," Frye said.

They had spent too many tours down there together, too many summers and too many winters. Sometimes it was like they were married, tuned into the same wavelength. "I don't know," Coyle finally said. "I think everything's getting under my skin this year. But don't ask me to put a finger on what it is exactly."

"Oh, but I am going to ask you that, Nicky."

"I knew you would."

"And?"

Coyle just sat there, shaking his head in silence. "I don't know if I'm losing it, but for some crazy goddamned reason I'm linking together too many things that probably have no connection at all. And that's making me . . . well, uneasy, I guess. I feel like some nutty old woman seeing prophecy in the tea leaves. You know?"

"No, not in the least," Frye said, "but I'm still listening. I figure once you get tired of talking around what's really bugging you, you'll come out and say it."

Coyle laughed. "You figure that, huh?"

"I do, Nicky. Because nobody knows you better than me. I love you like a brother but you're a sonofabitch."

"Okay. Let's cut to the chase."

He sighed and looked at the nudie calendar above Frye's desk. The well-thumbed back issues of *Popular Mechanics* and *Hot Rod* magazines beneath it. When Frye was on the Ice, all he did was talk about his cars back home: the '69 Plymouth Roadrunner and the '68 Dodge Charger he had meticulously restored, the '70 GTO that was currently stacked in his garage in pieces. That's the sort of things he liked to talk about. What he didn't like to talk about were his two marriages and how Antarctica had cost him both of them and a thirty-year old daughter that wouldn't even speak to him.

But for Polies, shattered families and relationships seemed to be the norm rather than the exception. It was hard to hold together something when you were at the bottom of the world ten months of the year.

Coyle sat there for a moment, like some engine inside had to warm up before he was ready to move. He looked around Frye's cramped little room, listened to the wind outside that made the walls thump from time to time as they contracted with the cold.

"All right. First we got that bullshit at Mount Hobb. Then we got that chopper crash. That thing under the tarp. That psycho Dayton. That all strikes me as strange." He laughed. "I know I'm starting to sound like Locke with his conspiracies, but in the back of my mind I keep knitting all this together and I can't seem to talk myself out of it."

"Maybe there's a reason for that," Frye said. "Maybe there's a very good reason for that."

"Which is?"

"Maybe you're right. Shit, maybe Locke is, too. I'm as hardheaded as the next guy, Nicky. I'm about as sensitive as a bin of scrap metal, but even I'm getting some funny vibes on this business. Especially after that chopper crash. Now, I don't know what Horn and Slim saw . . . shit, they're kids in my book, both green as Kermit's middle finger . . . but I'm willing to bet it was plenty bad. Slim's just a punk kid. Jesus, what color's his hair going to be tomorrow? But Horn has been around enough to know something goddamn odd when he sees it. And I'm willing to bet that what they saw was not a man, not even two of 'em mangled up together. It was some other kind of thing that I won't even put into words. Maybe I'm getting too damn old for this business, but that Dayton fellow rubbed me the wrong way. He ain't right and we both know it. If I didn't believe Horn and Slim before, after the way that jarhead acted . . . like the Holy Grail was under that tarp and he was sworn by Jesus himself to protect it . . . I do now."

Coyle was both relieved and disturbed that Frye and he were on the same page. They were both vets and they both knew right down to their marrow that things were happening this year that were more than a little goddamn peculiar.

"I just hope nobody goes nuts this year is all," Frye said.

"You mean like Danny Boy?"

"That would be the one."

The Safety rep last summer at Clime was Danny McClory, a.k.a. "Danny Boy." So called because he had cherubic cheeks with more freckles on them than a ten-year old boy running through sun-baked Indiana wheat. Danny Boy came on strong as all Safety reps do at first. He ran all over Clime in his cute little white hardhat, clipboard tucked under his arm, reminding people to wear safety glasses and earplugs and gloves and to tie up their hair around machinery.

He bugged the hell out of everyone.

Spent hours watching everyone do their jobs so he could find safer ways of doing them and thereby rationalizing his own existence at the camp when everyone else thought he was pretty much useless.

He studied the heavy equipment operators working the loaders in the scrapyard and the supply people on the lifts in the warehouse. He nosed around the Galley and labs and equipment shops generally making a plain nuisance of himself. He fined people and handed out written safety tests and OSHA brochures, gave driving tests and stopped people in trucks to see if they had their US driver's licenses with them. He made the crew watch safety videos like *Two Hands, Ten Fingers* and *Shake Hands with Danger* in which hapless workers were dismembered by industrial machinery, usually catching their arms in sheet metal presses or their hands in worm gears or augers. He also pasted up safety posters about Polies who ignored safety rules and always used the wrong tool for the wrong job and invariably lost a limb or inhaled some dangerous chemical or fell into an acid vat . . . on that one, the worker in question came out looking like a zombie from a 1950's horror comic.

Yeah, Danny Boy was something.

Then somebody turned him onto crack cocaine and Danny Boy was never the same again. He walked around the compound, dirty and unshaven and painfully thin like Johnny Thunders after a good binge, his eyes glazed over like January windows back home. Danny Boy was flown to McMurdo and put in detox.

Sometimes the isolation got to people.

Coyle shook his head. "But it all bugs me. Mount Hobb and that crash and that thing and Dayton. Christ, I'm starting to sound like Locke, but I'm getting paranoid or something. I'm starting to think that Colony Station is a snake nest. That all this is connected. Maybe Locke is right. Maybe there's something going on."

He hated like hell to admit that.

Locke was a very smart guy, but he was definitely out there. He claimed that the very fact the NSF had deep-field projects running this year was suspicious. They hadn't allowed such a thing since the winter of the Kharkov

Tragedy when Dr. Gates ran a paleontology expedition up in the Dominion Range, south of Clime.

Field camps could be dangerous in the summer, let alone the winter when the weather was bad and the cold unbelievable and planes and helicopters simply couldn't rescue you if you got in trouble. Those camps had all the most modern equipment and survival gear, but if things went to hell, you weren't much better off than the days of Shackleton and Mawson.

This winter, there were a variety of deep-field projects going. The first was run by a guy named Chambers and was situated in the foothills of the Marshall Mountains at an old derelict British station called Icy Ridge. He and his team were doing experiments for NASA with some kind of high-gain antenna. The second was being run in a series of ice caves in a narrow valley up on the Beardmore Glacier by a Dr. Dryden. The whole thing was funded by the Navy, word had it, but was supposed to be concerned with glaciology. With the military being involved, of course, nobody believed that for a minute. There was also another up on Wolfshead Glacier and yet another in the Mount Kirkpatrick range studying a series of subterranean caves. And if that wasn't enough, there was also a NOAA atmospherics camp out on the plateau that Clime was in direct support of.

On the surface, there was no reason to link these expeditions with any of the rest of it, but Coyle was doing exactly that and feeling damn foolish about it.

"Well, if anything's going on, Nicky, we'll start seeing the signs, I suppose." Frye shrugged. "Then again, maybe we're both just out of our heads and I'm beginning to think so. This keeps up, I'll have to join Locke's UFO group."

"I'll second that."

Frye looked contemplative for a moment. "I think if I try real hard, I can dismiss all that horseshit. Put it out of my mind. But I can't put Kharkov out of my mind and I sure as hell can't put those . . . whaddyacallem . . . megaliths out of my mind. I'm not stupid. I know that they're not natural and I know that the ice they melted 'em out of is too old for people to have built 'em. I think that's what I keep thinking about."

Coyle kept thinking about them, too. Nobody was saying much about them just yet save the conspiracy nuts on the net. But they were old. Real damned old. Part of a world that no longer existed and built by a race that nobody wanted to think about.

He took another shot of whiskey, a nice pleasant buzz coming over him. But all the alcohol in the world couldn't cleanse the knowledge from him that everything from Mount Hobb to the chopper crash and all the rest were pieces of some big puzzle that was slowly coming together.

"You know what?" he said. "I got the funniest feeling that something big is about to happen and when it does, there won't be any going back to the way things were before."

If Frye thought he was crazy, he didn't say so. He just drank.

Coyle could feel it in his guts: something big *was* coming, only he couldn't begin to know what shape it would take. Only that when it arrived, it would be revelation of the worst possible sort.

13

NOAA FIELD LAB POLARIS
ATLANTIS ICE DOME,
POLAR PLATEAU, FEB. 24

THREE WEEKS INTO IT and already a comfortable, if somewhat tedious, routine had been established.

Andrea Mack, Captain Starnes, and Professor Borden had their science and like most scientists they found it hard to look beyond the boundaries of their own particular obsessions. Something that Kim Pennycook, as a science writer and web producer, found alternately amusing and disturbing in that it only further reinforced the stereotype of the absent-minded professor. Even out in the cold and the wind, they became distracted and had to be collected when Dr. Bob, their field specialist, got the grub on the table.

When she mentioned this to Captain Starnes, who was the leader of the expedition and a commissioned officer in the NOAA Corps, he just smiled. "What is absent-minded to you, lady, is simply dedication to us."

It was a good crew and Kim figured the winter would be an easy one. Unlike last winter at Palmer Station where there were two distinctive cliques ready to tear out each other's throats with Kim, somehow, trapped in-between like a tasty bit of red meat.

In the past six years she had been documenting camp life and scientific endeavor for the NSF as part of an ongoing web presentation called *Polar Life*. From glaciers to mountains, icecaps to pack ice, she had been there studying penguin nesting and ozone hole shredding, tracking neutrinos and ice sheet slippage.

Though with her own background in environmental studies and ecology she found the science fascinating, the longer she spent down on the Ice, the

more intrigued she became with the dynamics of camp life, the interpersonal relationships, ups and downs of isolation and crowding.

Her third day at Polaris Lab she had interviewed Dr. Bob who was responsible for maintaining the camp, keeping the researchers warm and fed and comfortable as they plied their science in Earth's most inhospitable environment.

When she asked how he liked wintering with scientists, he said, "I like it just fine. Don't get me wrong, I've had my share. Some can be demanding and egotistical and in the case of one particle physicist I can think of, *tyrannical.* But for the most part they're good people. I get along fine with them."

"In the summers," Kim said, "there's a dividing line between scientists and workers that's very apparent."

"Oh, sure. But you'd get that in a factory or an Army base, anywhere people are crowded together. But in the winter it's different. A plumber and botanist play chess together. A heavy equipment operator and geochemist shoot darts. It has to be that way when the crews are smaller. You get very tight, cohesive."

Her second week she spent mostly with Captain Starnes launching weather balloons in conjunction with the Balloon Inflation Facility at Pole Station and the Atmospheric Research Observatory. Both the BIF and ARO had a detailed schedule of balloon launches and payloads that Starnes had to adhere to strictly.

"You can use satellites to track ozone depletion but that's notoriously unreliable because you're looking through the entire layer," he told her. "With balloons, you get right in there. I played with balloons when I was a kid and here I am still doing it."

The balloons carried radiosondes that measured humidity, wind speed, pressure, temperature etc. and ozonesondes that tracked ozone levels in the stratosphere. The results were sent to the ARO immediately.

This was Starnes's thing.

Professor Borden was a geomorphologist involved in climatic studies. He was taking core samples from the ice sheet. Trapped gases in the glacial ice

gave his people back at Princeton a detailed archive of ancient climate data.

Kim spent her second week getting a feel for what he was doing and the past three days she'd been hanging out with Andrea Mack, a planetary sciences grad student from UCLA who studying the mechanics of ice sheets.

"When I told my mom I was going to spend my summer in Antarctica, she thought I was crazy. She said I'd freeze to death. I told her that rarely happened anymore," Andrea told Kim. "But she was bothered about me coming. How can you go down there, she said, with what happened with those other poor people? She was talking about Kharkov Station, I think. But that's mom: she likes her gossip and she'll believe just about anything."

"Then you attach no credence to the supposed events at Kharkov?" Kim asked her.

"No, none whatsoever. I'm a scientist. I don't doubt the existence of alien life but the idea that it's down here in Antarctica and has been for millions of years, that there are extraterrestrial cities under the glaciers older than the Cretaceous . . . well, that's stretching reality a bit too much."

Kim had video of each interview archived that she could edit later for *Polar Life*. The NSF, of course, would demand that any mention of Kharkov be excised out of respect for the families of the cursed crew. Maybe that was the reason. Maybe it was something else.

No matter, even without the ghost stories of Kharkov, Kim was convinced that she was going to get some unprecedented footage this winter. The crew was small, insular, inter-dependent, and the relationships would be strong, nearly intimate. She was going to witness things this winter that would be absolutely revelatory.

She just had that feeling.

And on this, she was right.

14

FEBRUARY 25

VOICES.

They said if you listened to the wind long enough you would hear voices on it and maybe even your own name being called and sometimes Kim Pennycook could almost believe that one. And especially on nights like this when the wind screaming across the polar plateau sounded like the voices of the dead howling to be let in.

But that was Antarctica.

There were a hundred ways to go mad down there and especially once winter showed its teeth and the sun settled lower and lower each day and the darkness came, bleak and eternal. Something about the perpetual night made people want to climb the walls. Made them start imagining things and turning on one another.

She had seen it happen plenty of times and it could make for a long ugly winter. Petty rivalries became inflamed. Minor disagreements turned into major battles. Professional jealousies amongst the scientists became blood skirmishes. Despite all the psychological profiling, it still happened with unsettling frequency on the Ice. All it took was one nut to turn an entire station into a twelve-step program.

And that's why she was starting to worry about Andrea.

There was nothing there, nothing definable, yet she'd noticed a certain almost morbid shift in Andrea's character over the past few days and it was worrying her. Andrea, despite her scientific credentials and pragmatic world view, was young and impressionable.

"C'mon, Kim," Borden said. "You in or out? The redoubtable Captain Starnes has just laid down a full house, Jacks over tens . . . do me a favor and skunk him with four-of-a-kind. He deserves it."

Starnes laughed. “Ah, the man is clearly jealous of my card mechanics.”

“Card mechanics?” Borden said. “We used to call that cheating when I was a kid.”

More laughter.

“He’s still mad because we’re not getting the Callisto feed.”

“Do you blame me?” Borden said. “The biggest thing since sliced cheese and I miss it.”

They were all gathered at the table, supper dishes cleared, playing poker and gnawing on the cherry turnovers Dr. Bob had made. All of them . . . except Andrea.

She was standing before the window over by the radio listening to the wind, staring out into the blackness or maybe just staring at her own dour reflection in the glass.

The wind kicked up, shook the habitat, and the lights flickered.

Kim frowned. “Andrea? Why don’t you come play some cards with us and have a few laughs?”

“Sure,” Dr. Bob said. “Get over here before Doc Borden eats all the turnovers.”

“Is that another snide remark about my weight?” Borden chuckled.

Andrea just kept staring into the darkness.

Kim and Dr. Bob looked at one another.

“Andrea?” Kim said.

“What?” she turned towards them now, her face pale and shadowy in the dimness. “The wind makes funny sounds if you listen to it.”

“Just the wind,” Dr. Bob said. “Out here on the plateau, there’s nothing to stop it.”

Borden nodded. “Sure, give it a month and then it’ll really start screaming. I remember one year at Pole Station it was so loud that–”

“Come on, Andrea,” Kim said. She walked over to her and put a hand on her arm. Andrea turned around, a vicious look in her eyes like she was ready to tear out Kim’s throat.

“Hey!” Dr. Bob said.

“I’m all right,” Andrea said, her eyes dark and simmering. “I like to listen to the wind. It sounds like voices sometimes.”

Andrea put some Chapstik on her lips with a trembling hand. “Come and have some fun with us.”

“I’m fine right here.”

Borden and Starnes exchanged looks. What they were seeing in Andrea was not making them very confident of the next five months. All it took was one bad one, one member of the team that could not adapt, and there would be trouble. They all had work to do which would not get done if they had to keep an eye on Andrea.

She kept staring out into the night, head cocked, listening to something no one else seemed to hear.

15

POLAR CLIME STATION

IT WAS SHEER CURIOSITY more than anything else that brought Coyle to the Community Room that night to watch NASA's feed from the Cassini 3 probe of Callisto. How could you not be curious about such a thing? That winter they had Professor Eicke from MIT's Haystack Observatory, an atmospheric physicist who spent most of his time in the Atmospherics Lab dabbling about with mid-latitude ionospheric research, magnetospheric studies and thermospheric measurements. Exciting stuff like that.

Eicke had told Coyle that the surface of Callisto was a pretty nasty place . . . cold, dark, and uninviting. It was the second largest moon of Jupiter and the third largest in the solar system itself. Other than immense meteoric impact craters, the surface was rather smooth, covered in what might be pack ice that hid a salty ocean below.

"It's a damned awful place by Earth standards," Eicke said. "Over two-hundred degrees below zero and blasted by Jupiter's immense magnetic field that creates a storm of charged particles and weird electric currents at the surface. And don't forget that ammoniated ocean beneath the ice. Not exactly Palm Beach, Nicky."

"You think there's life there?"

Eicke just shrugged. "Could be. But if there is, it's going to be microscopic or damned strange if it's not."

The Community Room was bustling.

Chairs had been set out and Ida had made frozen pizzas and bowls of popcorn, The Beav on her ass the whole while. Coyle kept out of it, let the girls have their fun, trying not to think of the disaster area they were making of his kitchen. Most of those present were happily drunk or at least buzzed from the drinking and debauchery segment of the Callisto Party.

Coyle had put away a few, but he felt very clear-headed and alert as he waited for the transmission on the big plasma screen TV to begin. It had been his intention to get roaring drunk, but his heart hadn't been in it. The tension that had been slowly building in him would not be denied. So he remained tight as a wire, thinking and thinking about what Frye and he had been discussing the night before, all the weird things around them that seemed to be building into something.

Well, if anything's going on, Nicky, we'll start seeing the signs, I suppose.

And that's exactly what Coyle was worrying about.

He was sitting with Frye and Danny Shin, the geologist, all three of them sipping their drinks.

"This is pretty goddamn amazing," Shin was saying, pulling off a bottle of Rolling Rock. "I mean, have you guys even taken the time to think about this? About what it all means?"

"What does it mean, Danny?" Frye said. "Being a scientist and all, maybe you better explain it to a dumb shit like me."

Shin sighed. "It means the best part of you ran down your uncle's leg."

"No shit? Well, least we got something in common, because the best part of *you* ran down your mother's chin."

Shin laughed and stroked the mustache trailing off his face. "You know, that's your problem, Frye. You have no interest in anything important. Just that shit you spew from your mouth. Science means nothing to you."

"You're right, Danny. I have no faith in it. Ever since your mother's birth control failed, I just don't trust it."

Coyle tuned them out. Their arguments went on incessantly like a game of Monopoly. They were always picking at one another. Yet, whenever there was a gathering, they sat together. Go figure.

He studied the tinfoil flying saucers and stars that were hanging overhead, Doc's CPR dummies that were painted green and given big alien eyes and antennas like *My Favorite Martian.* The photos of bug-eyed alien monsters from 1950's B-movies like *It Conquered the World* and *Invasion of the Saucermen* that had been printed out and pasted just about everywhere. These were only outdone by Locke's contributions which were artist's

conceptions of other planets and various blurry UFO photographs, not to mention blow-ups of the Beacon Valley megaliths that were plastered all over the internet. One of these was nearly the size of a mural with spooky gigantic lettering over its face which asked the eternal question: ARE WE ALONE?

Coyle pulled from his Captain and Coke, watching the people and trying to get a sense from them of what they felt about it all. How they felt about video from Callisto.

Horn sat by himself, looking mildly amused and mildly disappointed as he did at all gatherings. Ida and The Beav were swooping around with platters of food like mother birds looking for hungry beaks to fill. Hopper and Special Ed and Doc Flagg had taken up their spots in the back of the room. Everyone else was just loosely scattered around. The Coven—which consisted of Gwen Curie and all the other females in camp: Ida, The Beav, Gut, Cassie Malone, and a cute GA named Lynn Zutema that everyone called "Zoot"—were pretty much mixing as was Locke and his impromptu UFO conspiracy study group. Slim was cozying in with the Coven, doing shots of tequila with Cassie and Zoot. The FEMC crew—Facilities, Engineering, Maintenance, and Construction—which consisted of Koch, Cryderman, Hansen, and Stokes were at their usual table listening to Cryderman's cynical wit and wisdom. Gwen was shaking a mixer of martinis, her breasts jiggling beneath her jersey which read: I LUV ANAL PROBES. Harvey was alone, looking around to see who the Freemasons were. Every time Coyle caught his eyes, and Coyle was trying hard not to do that, Harvey would smile conspiratorially and quickly glance at one of the crew as if to say, *yeah, that one, Nicky. He's one of them. You can tell by their eyes.*

He was very suspicious of the FEMC crew.

"You know what your problem is, Frye?" Shin was saying. "You're just plain ignorant."

"Maybe I'm ignorant, but I ain't so ignorant that I can't admit when I'm wrong. Like some fucking eggheads I know."

"Oh yes, start with that crap. Us against them. The scientists versus the workers."

Frye swallowed the rest of his beer. “Right there, that’s your problem, Danny. You think you beakers run the show down here. Well, you don’t. If it weren’t for guys like me keeping you warm and fed and keeping your lights working and your water running . . . where the hell would you be?”

“I never said we run the show. I just said that guys like you are in a support position. That’s all. You keep things running so we can do our thing.”

“You’re damn right. You should remember that.”

“Boy,” Shin said. “This guy will argue about anything.”

“What do you mean by that?”

Again, Coyle tuned them out. That was something you learned at the stations: you kept your sanity by ignoring just about everything that went on around you. And down there, ninety percent of everything was bullshit so that made things real easy.

He wondered if he was the only one tying up everything together, seeing wolves behind every tree. Feeling that something big and impossibly ominous was about to happen. But he didn’t think so. He knew Frye was and probably Horn, too.

As he looked around, listening in on various conversations, he had the oddest sense that there was a tension here that was independent of him. People were laughing too loud or talking too quickly. They couldn’t sit still and when they did they smiled too much like those smiles were painted on and they couldn’t get them off. Everything was keyed-up. Now and again, he’d hear a peal of laughter that sounded almost hysterical in tone.

Cassie Malone came over, more than a little drunk, and draped herself around Coyle. “Hey, Nicky! What say we get fucked-up before that Castini thing happens? What say?”

Gwen came over and removed her, leading her back to her chair so she did not fall down, restraining her when she lifted her shirt and flashed her breasts at Horn.

“C’mon, Gwenny! Not like he don’t wanna see ‘em! He’s always staring at my junk ‘n’ stuff!” She burst out laughing. “Did I say junk-stuff or stuff-junk? Woo-hoo, check out my junk-stuff!”

Gwen got her into her seat and pretty much had to sit on her lap to get her to behave.

And on it went.

Hopper stood up and cleared his throat, blew his damn whistle. "Attention! Attention, everyone! Dr. Eicke would like to speak now! Let's all listen to what he has to say! I'm sure it's very important!"

Shin laughed. "What's that guy smoking anyhow?"

"I don't know but I want some!" Cassie Malone called out.

"Probably the same thing your mother was smoking when she was pregnant with you," Frye told Shin.

Eicke walked out in front of the plasma screen that hung from the wall. He was a bespectacled, round little man with a closely-trimmed white beard that made him look like Santa Claus. Something that was accentuated by his rolling bold laughter and his habit of patting his expansive belly as he spoke. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said, nodding and smiling, "I've just received word from the probe team at Ames Research Center in California."

Gwen sipped her martini and nuzzled Coyle's ear. "You hear that, Nicky? He just said *probe*."

"Ssshh," he told her.

Eicke looked around. "We can expect to get our feed within the next twenty or thirty minutes. But before we do, I thought I'd touch upon the mission of the Cassini Three itself and, more importantly, the probe it has launched at Callisto."

He did more than touch upon it.

For the next fifteen minutes he went on in dusty detail about the Cassini 3 mission which was extensive reconnaissance and mapping of the Galilean moons—Europa and Io, Ganymede and Callisto. All of which were considered excellent candidates for subsurface oceans that theoretically might be teaming with life. The entire operation would lay the final groundwork for the Ice Clipper mission that would sample the surfaces of the moons using an impactor and the Ice Penetrator mission that would melt through the ice caps using a thermal probe, a cryobot.

That much was interesting.

But when he got down to the nuts and bolts of the probe itself and talked endlessly of dust detectors and neutral mass spectrometers, heavy ion counters and plasma wave imaging, he pretty much lost everyone. Other than Shin and possibly Hopper himself, nobody really gave a damn about near-infrared mapping or particle investigation or molecular biology studies and chemosynthesis. It was all pretty heavy stuff. Like computers or cellphones, nobody cared how they worked or truly understood the engineering feats involved, so long as they *did* work.

Coyle stopped paying attention about halfway through and started studying everyone again.

He looked at the walls with their pictures of alien monsters and flying saucers and whatnot, his interest immediately captured by Locke's photos of the Beacon Valley megaliths. These were the most recent photographs and although Coyle had not seen the structures firsthand, he knew very well what it all meant. The discovery of those things was the single biggest can of worms opened since the splitting of the atom.

He stared at them.

They looked somewhat similar to Stonehenge and the others that dotted the British Isles and northern Europe . . . save the Beacon Valley stones were far more complex and gigantic. Infinitely more complex: a grim collection of uprights and pylons that were tall and leaning, conjoined and free-standing. Some of which were flattened at their apexes and others supporting horizontal crossbars and still others bisecting at their tops into a profusion of sharp, gnarled spines that towered above the entire mass in spires and spokes, making the entire structure look like it had been overgrown by dead trees.

There was something very unpleasant and disturbing about the megaliths taken as a whole. Something surreal and morbid and, yes, alien.

Coyle didn't like looking at any of it, but he did. He eyes roamed that monolithic forest of pillars and shafts and spidery pipes and he could not look away. His eyes were lost in their tangles and lunatic architecture, drawn to them, captured and held as something morosely black crawled in the back of his mind, in some cellar of primal shadow.

No, he could not look away and some part of him did not want to.

His rational brain could make no earthly sense of what that carven megalithic desolation was built to represent. But his dreaming brain, that primitive machine we all carry in the pits of our psyches, seemed to recognize what it was and understand that its purpose was both mechanistic and spiritual. A thing of dark beauty and nameless obscenity. A very simple construction, really, with a very simple purpose–

Yet, his dreaming and rational brains were light years apart and could not communicate or reach common ground.

Coyle was left shivering between them, wanting to know and wanting anything but. He could only look and let his imagination tell him what he was seeing. The entire thing was quarried from some black pitted stone that made it resemble the great carbonized exoskeleton of some alien insect thawing from the ice.

Finally, he looked away.

"Okay, everyone," Eicke said. "The feed is coming . . . get ready . . ."

Coyle sucked in a sharp breath, felt something knot suddenly in his belly. He gripped the arms of his chair with everything he had, his knuckles popping white.

Good God, he thought, *here it comes...*

16

NOAA FIELD LAB POLARIS,
ATLANTIS ICE DOME

ANDREA MACK DID NOT sleep.

She did not even close her eyes.

The others were tired from a long grueling day in the cold and drifted off almost as soon as their heads hit their pillows. Andrea could hear Kim's breathing across the room, even and deep. In the men's dormitory across the hall there was snoring.

The Polaris habitat was basically a long rectangular box. A temporary shelter erected by the NOAA techs. The men slept in one room, the women in another. There was lab space with diagnostics and computer science workstations. Generator room and water plant. A coring room. A supply cabinet and food locker. The common room took up most of the structure. Here was the galley, the DVD library and TV, the workout bike, the radio, the usual amenities of camp life.

All in all, it was silent.

The only sound save breathing and snoring, was the wind outside, forever moaning across the polar plateau, shaking the habitat, and throwing a scrim of ice and snow against its walls.

Andrea heard all these things.

But she was listening to something else.

Something buried in the wind. A single melancholy voice that was calling to her and had been calling to her now for days.

Quietly, she slipped out of her bunk and into the common room. She hastily pulled on her thermals and ECWs, then looked out the window into the shifting blackness of the polar night.

She saw a shape beckon to her as it pulled away into the shadows.

“I’m coming,” she said. “I’m coming.”

Listening to the wind and knowing now that it owned her, she popped the airlock and stepped outside to whatever waited for her.

17

POLAR CLIME STATION

THE SILENCE THAT DESCENDED on the Community Room was immense.

It was thick and almost suffocating in its dire enormity. No one moved. No one touched their drinks or food or even seemed to breathe. You could practically hear fingernails growing and cells dividing.

Then somebody gasped.

The static on the screen went blue with assorted transmission fields of rolling numbers coming from NASA. Then it flickered and an image swam into view. A brownish-orange sphere that was set with darker reddish areas and speckled by white and yellow splotches that were the scars of ancient impact craters. The voice-over said this was Callisto as seen from five-million miles out by Cassini 3. The image had been enhanced, but in no way doctored.

Callisto.

The second largest moon of Jupiter as photographed by Cassini 3 nearly four-hundred million miles from Earth. The voice-over explained that this photograph was several days old. That since it was taken, Cassini 3 had fallen into a parabolic orbit around the moon itself and had descended to send out its probe. And that any moment, the live feed would be coming in, traveling across the reaches of space at the speed of light.

The image flickered.

And then flickered again.

There were a series of pinging sounds and beeps, scratchy-sounding telemetry coming in. Lots of background noise like static and blowing wind and rushing water. A low, unnerving hum that rose and fell, but never went completely away.

The voice-over said the feed was coming in now.

The picture rolled, went blurry, sharpened . . . then they were seeing what the probe was seeing as it descended down towards that ancient moon. It wasn't much at first. Except for the coloring, it could have been Earth's moon. Yet, looking upon it, you knew it most certainly was not. Because everyone that saw the image knew that they were looking at something no human eyes had ever seen and that was something that no man or woman could take lightly.

The image spun as the trajectory took the probe down, down, down until the voice-over said it was now twenty-five miles above the surface, moving east to west. It kept descending and soon enough, everyone in the room was looking at the surface of Callisto which was oddly featureless—no mountains or hills—just a weathered and scarred crust cut by deep fissures and huge impact craters with concentric stress rings fractured around them. Not much else really.

It was empty, dead, barren.

Like clay waiting to be formed, sculpted into something . . . *anything*.

Nobody said a word.

Everybody in that room was tense as if they were waiting for something to happen, only they didn't know what.

Coyle sat there, a strange crawling sensation at his spine.

Gwen's hand gripped his own in a hot, sweaty embrace.

It was ridiculous, but he did not like what he was seeing.

The surface was just too old, too ugly, too something. He couldn't quite put a finger on it. The human mind, he knew, looked for signs of life, of motion, of activity. And right then even a couple little green men flitting about would have been welcome. Because Callisto was empty, dead, motionless. Like something suspended and waiting. An insect in amber. It was not simply lifeless and sterile like the moon or some barren asteroid. You got the feeling that *something* was there. Something was hiding in the shadows and craters.

The probe had dropped to 20,000 feet now.

It was firing its rockets.

The images were lost until it landed.

Then they came back.

The probe had touched down just due south of the Valhalla impact basin, in a curious trench that was several miles wide and was believed to be cut down to the icy crust covering the ocean itself. The probe panned its searchlights around and there was little to see but an empty plain of something like pack ice and black, blasted rocks. The voice-over came on and said that the probe was operating perfectly. Telemetry told them that it was drilling into the ice to sample for organic molecules and paleo-indicators.

Then the image began to tremble.

Everyone tensed.

Something was happening.

"Earthquake," somebody said.

But Eicke was quick to point out that there was no seismic activity on Callisto. That it was a geologically dead world. No volcanoes, no earth tremors, no nothing. It didn't even have wind or weather or anything that you would call an atmosphere.

The trembling continued.

The voiceover was gone.

Seconds before it happened, Coyle felt it.

Four-hundred million miles away, he actually *felt* it. About sixty or seventy feet from the probe, the crust fanned out with a series of cracks and broke apart as something struck it from below, pushing aside the ice in great plates. Whatever it was, it was rising up and up, a gigantic black mass of vertical shafts and pipe-like structures. Rising, rising. The external mics of the probe recorded the thundering and booming that sounded oddly like an airstrike.

"Oh my God," somebody said. "Oh my fucking God."

And, yeah, that about covered it. For what had risen up now from that primordial crust, towering high above the probe itself, was exactly what had been melted out of Beacon Valley: a series of interconnected megaliths. An

exact duplicate of what was at that moment in a valley of the Sentinel Mountains. The shafts and crossbars, slabs and pillars and piping. It rose up, water and sheets of ice dropping from it, some primal alien machine that was black and corroded and skeletal as it reached up to the sky with those spiky protrusions.

God, Coyle thought, like some rawboned spider with a million legs breaking free of an egg.

It was Locke who broke the silence.

He was beside himself as if every crazy theory and half-baked hypothesis of his had been confirmed beyond his wildest expectations. No, this wasn't a flying saucer or a pod of little grays saying, *take me to your leader,* but at the same time, it was *exactly* that. For the structure had risen seconds after the probe had landed. And it was no naturally-occurring phenomena. It was something engineered.

Maybe not alive exactly.

But sentient, aware, ready to make contact.

He ran up to the screen, hooting and hollering, gesticulating madly and talking so fast no one could understand a word he said. At least, not until the end: *"Do you see? Do all of you see? It's been out there waiting for us all this time! Wanting to make contact with us! Whoever built it left us a calling card in Beacon Valley and now here's the real thing! It sees us! It knows we're here!"*

And then the picture went out.

It did not come back.

Locke just froze up like somebody had unplugged him.

He teetered this way, then that, looked like he might fall right over. But he didn't. He just started hopping up and down, shouting and screaming, knocking over tables and kicking the wall.

"THEY HAVE NO RIGHT!" he cried out. "THEY HAVE NO RIGHT TO CENSOR THOSE IMAGES! THOSE IMAGES BELONG TO US! ALL OF US!"

Special Ed and Hopper and Doc Flagg took hold of him as he ranted and raved, just completely hysterical at what he had seen and what he thought

those fuckwigs at NASA or the NSF were keeping from him. It took all three of them to get him out of the room and when he was gone, nobody said a goddamn thing for the longest time.

They sat there in shocked silence.

Then someone, maybe Zoot, started tittering deep in her throat with a sound that could have become either laughter or tears, but decided on the former. A rusty, creaking sort of laugh and pretty soon half of the room had joined in. But there was no humor in that laughter. It was more of a delayed reaction to revelation and fear, confusion and absurdity—brittle and braying and sharp. The sort of uncomfortable, unexpected laughter that breaks out at funerals. A psychological safety valve that has to be vented, one way or another.

Coyle did not join in.

The sound of it was almost frightening. The sound of oncoming dementia, of madness and impending nervous breakdowns. He just squeezed his eyes shut and wished to God it would stop.

Finally, it did.

The laughter screeched to a halt and everyone just looked at each other, the floor and the walls and those silly movie alien pictures everywhere. But mostly, they looked at the images of the Beacon Valley megaliths. A lot of them tried to say something, but many didn't even bother. Then one by one, they filtered from the room.

"Jesus H. Christ," Shin finally said. "Do you know what this means?"

Coyle sighed. "Yeah."

But honestly, he didn't. Nobody really did.

For this was the worst possible thing . . . the idea that there was an intelligence out there in the cosmos. One that had visited Earth millions of years before and was still active even now. Maybe people pretended that they wanted to make contact, but the truth was that they did *not*.

It was scary.

It threw you on your ass.

It made your culture and your religion and your idiosyncratic belief system pale and wither, gave all of it the importance of the Sunday funnies. Amusing, but hardly significant in the greater cosmic whole of which you were now, sadly, only a minor player. Because whatever was intelligent enough to visit Earth twenty- or thirty-million years ago, had to have been practically gods by this point.

It made Coyle feel like a microbe on a slide, some huge and alien eye watching him. More so, it made him think of the entire human race as ants racing on a hillside, some giant foot waiting to come down and squash them flat.

He felt many things like everyone else and none of them were remotely comforting.

But it was Frye who summed up what they were all feeling and what they would all *be* feeling through that long, dark winter: "You know what? That thing scared the shit out of me."

And that was it.

For maybe those megaliths that had come out of the ice were four-hundred million miles away, but the ones up in the Sentinels were much closer. And whoever had built them and whatever their purpose was, everyone at Clime was trapped down there with them until spring.

18

NOAA FIELD LAB POLARIS

IT WAS KIM PENNYCOOK who heard the scream.

It was shrill and screeching and filled with agony and cut through her sleep like razors, laying something inside her bare.

She bolted upright in bed, clicked the light.

Andrea was gone just as she knew she would be.

Kim jumped out of bed, pulling her boots on, and stumbled out into the hallway. Dr. Bob was already scrambling down the corridor. Borden and Starnes were both disoriented from sleep.

"What the hell's going on?" Borden asked.

"It's Andrea," Kim told him. "She's not in her bed. That scream . . . she must be outside."

Borden cocked an ear, listening to the blow out there that sounded black and deadly. "In that?"

"Jesus," Starnes said.

They all made it to the common room at the same time, feeling the habitat trembling. Dr. Bob was breaking flashlights out from the emergency gear cabinet. Kim went to the window and clicked on the perimeter lights. She thought for an instant she saw Andrea out there, just standing there in the wind, staring at her, grinning like a skull. Then a gust of snow obscured everything and when it passed there was nothing.

Kim gasped. "I thought . . ."

"What?" Borden said, his eyes pinched from sleep, but steely with anxiety. "I thought . . . I thought I saw someone."

"Okay. We have to go after her. She won't last out in that," Starnes said, checking the computer screen with its constant feed from MacWeather,

McMurdo. “It’s ten below out there, wind chill pushing to down to minus twenty-five. Wind gusting at thirty miles an hour. It’ll suck the heat from her.”

Dr. Bob was already in his ECWs: wind pants and bunny boots, red parka, gaiter, Balaclava, and snow goggles. He pulled on Thermax gloves and wool mittens over them. “I’ll take one person with me,” he said. “The other two better stay here in case we get in trouble.”

Starnes started pulling on his ECWs, but he saw the look in Dr. Bob’s eye. *If we don’t come back there has to be someone experienced here. We can’t leave these people alone.*

“I’ll go,” Borden said.

No objections. He pulled on his gear. They each took a fifty-foot coil of rope, emergency radios, and ice-axes. They strapped yellow miner’s helmets to their heads with fixed LED lights on them that kept the hands free. They went to the airlock.

“Try to stay to the flagged path if you can,” Starnes told them. “Call in every fifteen minutes without fail. We’ll keep the lights burning bright as a beacon.” They stepped out into the cold and night.

Something crawling inside her, Kim wondered if she’d ever see any of them again.

19

THE AURORAS WERE FLASHING green and blue in the sky as they moved over the ice, leaning into the fierce drift-wind that threw snow around in a wild, raging tempest.

"Andrea!" Dr. Bob called out. "Andrea!"

Borden echoed him.

They pushed forward listening to the black flags flapping madly.

Great night for a fucking walk, Andrea, Dr. Bob thought, then immediately chided himself for such petty, selfish thoughts. Andrea Mack was young, inexperienced, naïve and probably more than a little impressionable. And this combined with an active imagination led to the entire crisis.

She shouldn't have been down here.

Despite all the psychological evaluations and profiling, half of the people that came down to the Ice did not belong there. This was something Dr. Bob knew all too well.

One year at Siple Station, a meteorologist named Cousins had become obsessed with the idea that extraterrestrials were coming. It got more than a little scary. He ranted and raved, actually began foaming at the mouth, saying, *"They're here! They're here!"* No one sensed them but him. He claimed they were in his head and they wanted him to purge every last member of the crew. As the winter wore on, he seemed to be able to talk about nothing but the upcoming first contact. He began displaying acute paranoia and obsession. Then he actually became dangerous. He had to be sedated and locked down until he could be flown out in the spring.

When spring came, he was worse, not better.

He was put on a gurney and strapped down for the flight. Dr. Bob had been one of the crew that loaded him onto an ANG C-130. And for the life of him, he would never forget what Cousins said. *"You people can pretend all*

you want, Bob, but they're here as they've always been here. You go ahead and laugh, but you won't be laughing when they come for you. And they will, God yes, they will."

The thing was, Dr. Bob hadn't been laughing.

It was hard to laugh at something that scared the shit out of you.

"Which way?" Borden said.

There was an absolute maze of flagged pathways running to and from the habitat. They led to coring sites and automated weather stations, places where Andrea herself had been studying the ice sheet.

"She'd probably go out to the divide," Dr. Bob said, nearly having to shout above the wind at times. "That's where she's been working."

Borden looked around, scanning the polar wastes in all directions with his helmet light. "Okay."

Dr. Bob led on, pulling himself forward with the guide ropes, leaning into the wind and following the pathway out to the ice divide where Andrea had been doing some cryospheric sampling. The divide marked a boundary on the ice sheet where opposing flows of ice were separated, rather like currents in a lake.

The weather was getting worse and if they didn't find her soon, both men knew, they wouldn't find her at all.

Dr. Bob kept going, calling out Andrea's name, feeling the cold all too well by that point despite his ECWs. The cold was always bad enough in and of itself, but when it was driven by the wind it was devastating.

He paused now and again, panning his light around with a twist of his neck.

Nothing.

The flat, seamless expanse of the plateau was repetitious and unchanging. Flakes of drift filled the beam of his light.

"Andrea!" Borden called out.

The wind was moaning and his voice was swallowed by it. Even if she were twenty feet away, she probably would not have heard it.

The divide was just ahead.

Dr. Bob paused and pointed in that direction with his ice-axe.

They moved on, heads bowed, for maybe five minutes before they both stopped.

"What?" Borden said.

Dr. Bob played his light over the snow. In that unbroken whiteness, anything with color stood out drastically and particularly something as vibrant as the color red.

"Blood?" Borden said.

Dr. Bob nodded, turning his face from the wind. "Quite a bit of it . . . it leads off."

"But we'll have to leave the pathway to follow it."

"We don't have a choice."

But Borden was not convinced of that. He looked around, shouting Andrea's name. Then he looked back in what he assumed to be the direction of the habitat. It was lost in the storm. Now and then the drift would stop blowing and they could see the lights. If it had been a clear night, you could have seen them for miles.

"I don't know," Borden said. "I don't like this."

"It'll be fine. I've done this before," Dr. Bob told him.

He unspooled his coil of rope and tied a loop around his waist and then tied the end to Borden's rope. That gave him a hundred feet which would be plenty, he figured. The end of Borden's rope was tied to one of the pathway flagpoles in case Borden dropped it and the wind decided to take it away.

"Just feed the slack out to me," Dr. Bob said. "And get on the radio, call in. Tell 'em what we're doing."

He ducked under the guide ropes and started off into darkness.

"Be careful!" Borden called out.

Dr. Bob had every intention of that.

Using his helmet lamp, he followed the blood trail, his stomach churning sickly as he saw more and more of it . . . sometimes just a few drops or splotches and other times great frozen puddles. It was a lot of blood and in

the wind, the cold, he knew very well that she would not survive a massive loss of blood.

But how had it happened?

Had she slit her wrists?

There seemed to be no other possibility. There was nothing out here that could hurt her, not even a jagged sheet of ice. Everything was flat and smooth.

The snow that was blowing was old snow, he figured, probably scooped up by the wind somewhere in the mountains and driven across the plateau. The way it was coming down, the blood trail would be gone within thirty minutes and probably a lot less.

Time was of the essence.

He stopped.

What the fuck is that?

Something about ten feet away, half-covered in drift. He went over there. He brushed snow from it and what he saw was like an aluminum shell . . . or a casket. It was about eight feet long and it had a lid. He dug his fingers around the lip and pulled the lid open. There was nothing in there. Just some frozen slime or goo. Nothing else.

He couldn't make sense of it.

Was it an abandoned container from when the team set up Polaris? Maybe. But those boys were real picky about leaving any junk or waste laying around. USAP rules were very strict.

But what else could it have been?

Surely not a coffin. Not out here.

Screw it. You're not here to play detective.

He moved faster, feeling the tug of the rope around his waist as he plunged forward into the drift-wind. He came to a field of blood. It was everywhere. Icy puddles. Runnels and loops of it and then–

Oh, Jesus.

Andrea.

She had been slaughtered, gutted, ripped open from crotch to chest, her entrails clinging to the ice like flash-frozen snakes. One arm was torn off, the other broken and twisted beneath her. Her left leg beneath the knee was missing. Only a knob of bone protruded.

Dr. Bob tripped over a blood-streaked bunny boot.

Her foot was still in it.

Swallowing down his nausea, he moved closer, shining his light in her face. Beyond the fur-fringe of her parka it looked like it had been split wide by an axe.

Enough.

He moved away, filled with an unreasoning terror of what might have happened to her and if a similar fate awaited him.

As he followed the rope, his brain tried to find some explanation but there was none. There were no vicious animals on the polar plateau. Christ, there weren't any animals whatsoever. And in his mind that left only one possibility: she had been murdered.

But by who?

And why?

The drift-wind was a solid mass swirling around him. His helmet beam wouldn't make it more than six or seven feet before reflecting back a solid wall of flying snow. He kept seeing shadows moving at the edge of the light.

Imagination.

It had to be imagination.

Yet, his skin was crawling. The cold. He was probably getting hypothermic. He kept thinking of the ice-axe on his belt. But he had to keep following the rope with both hands.

He stopped dead.

What the hell was that?

The wind. It could make funny noises out on the plateau, whining and shrieking. It could sound very much like voices calling out or whispering and particularly in the teeth of a storm.

But what he heard sounded like laughter.

Cold, hysterical female laughter.

He shined his light this way and that, his heart seizing up painfully in his chest. A shape. A shadow. Moving just out of his field of vision, circling, moving in closer.

"Who's there?" he called out. "Who the fuck is out there?"

A peal of icy, almost unearthly laughter came out of the storm.

He started running . . . or trying to . . . stumbling along in his bunny boots, following the rope with his light, now and again feeling Borden taking up the slack.

God, it couldn't be far, couldn't be very far at all.

Something hit him and pitched him face first to the ice.

In the arcing light of his helmet he saw very well what came out of the storm and descended on him.

He had time to scream only once.

20

POLAR CLIME STATION

C-CORRIDOR.

Cassie Malone was lying on her bed feeling a low dull throb in her head. Every time she tried to sit up the pounding got so bad she nearly passed out from it. Too much booze at the party. That's all it was. She hadn't been drunk in months and it hit her really hard.

You were only sleeping for two hours. . . how could you have a hangover already?

No, it didn't make sense. Maybe the next day but not a couple hours later. She lay there, massaging her temples, remembering something, trying to remember something.

The dream.

Oh God, that awful dream.

It came back in bits and pieces, fragments that sewed themselves back up into a hodgepodge whole cloth of phantasm: black, jagged mountain peaks that reached to dizzying, aery heights . . . rising, rising . . . sharp cones clustered with weird, unnatural structures like barnacles clinging to the masts of sunken ships—oblong cubes and honeycombed pylons, pyramidal towers and stacked disks. All of it crowded, overlapping, and profuse, geometrically complex nightmare cities capped by reaching needle-tipped spires that scratched at the cold stars above.

In the dream, Cassie soared up to the highest pinnacles of that diabolic metropolis and looked down at valleys and plains and narrow troughs of blasted black rock as the first few fingers of glaciation reached in and it was then she realized she was not alone.

Things were moving around her, rustling and sweeping, touching her, prodding her, pulling at her hair and brushing her spine. Night shapes with

great fanning vampiric wings filling the empty spaces of the dead city in a dense and suffocating black cloud of whirring animation.

Cassie could not escape them.

Nor could she ignore the invasion of their voices

(cassie)

(cassieeeeeee)

which were buzzing and echoing

(give unto)

(give unto us that which we)

(gave unto you)

and surreal, filling her head with insane imagery until it pounded with a dire susurration of pain which blossomed into agony until she thought her skull would fly apart into gleaming white-polished fragments of bone.

And then she woke up, the headache throbbing.

She swallowed Motrin, aspirins . . . nothing touched it. And in some dim back room of her mind she knew she needed to get down to Medical, but even lifting herself up a few inches made her head pound like a big old bass drum.

A white-hot jolt of cutting pain ripped through her brain and she cried out, falling from the bed to the cold floor. *Oh, dear God, make it end mama make it stop oh please mama it hurts so bad it really hurts so bad I can't take it make it stop mama mama mama–*

Everything around her was moving, thrumming, losing solidity. The walls were dripping, the door running like water. Nothing was holding its shape, everything liquid and melting.

The corner.

She crawled towards the corner because it was here that the angles met and deliverance could be had. *Listen to the wind, listen to the voices of the wind.* Bathed in sweat, shaking and sobbing, Cassie found the corner and reached out and *through* the wall into a sucking, vortexual blackness that drew her in.

21

NOAA FIELD LAB POLARIS

"WE SHOULD CALL THIS in," Kim Pennycook told Starnes back in the habitat. "Call Clime and tell them what's going on."

Starnes shook his head. "Not yet."

"I don't like this . . . there's something funny about it."

Starnes sat before the radio, staring at it, waiting for Dr. Bob and Borden to call in. They were due anytime now. He could feel the tension threading through him. He was in charge of Polaris. If things went to hell, if Andrea died out there, he'd be blamed.

C'mon, c'mon, call me with some good news.

"Dr. Bob is about as experienced as you're going to get," he said. "If anybody can find her, he can."

"But blood . . . Borden said there was blood."

"Let's not jump to conclusions here."

"I can't help it." Kim shook her head, pacing back and forth. "What got into her? What made her go out there?"

Starnes knew, whatever happened here, good or bad, that was one of the very questions he would be asked by the NSF brass in McMurdo. *You saw that Miss Mack was exhibiting signs of withdrawal, depression, isolation anxiety... and you did nothing?*

Shit.

He thumbed the keypad. "This is Polaris calling. Dr. Bob? Professor Borden? Please respond. Over."

Nothing but static came over the receiver. There was a curious sort of droning sound buried in it, rising and falling. Just atmospheric noise, background clatter, yet Starnes found himself listening to it.

"Where are they?" Kim asked, dread filling her now.

"I don't know."

Starnes tried again and got nothing.

Here was a judgment call. The sort of thing he'd been trained for and the very thing that left him reeling when faced with it. But he had to keep calm, keep his head. Pennycook was ready to jump out of her skin and he had to do everything in his power to alleviate that before she did something stupid like trying to go after them.

"Well, we just can't sit here and do nothing," she said, getting wired now on all the coffee she'd been pouring in herself.

"That's exactly what we're going to do–"

Kim screamed.

Screamed and stumbled backwards, tripping over her own feet, her coffee cup hitting the floor.

"What?" Starnes said, helping her up. "What is it?"

She was staring past him towards the window, her eyes huge and glassy, her mouth contorted like it was ready to scream again. She looked like she was in shock or darn near to it. Gradually, by degrees, she snapped out of it. "I saw . . . I saw something move past the window."

Starnes looked over at it. Nothing there but the cold Antarctic night pressing up against the glass. He went over to it and peered out. Still nothing.

Kim was shivering, hugging herself. Her face was bloodless, a tic in the corner of her lips. She was having trouble regulating her breathing. "I saw it . . . it moved past the window . . . then it looked in, it looked right at me . . . *it was seeing me . . .*"

"What was seeing you?"

She shook her head. "It was a face . . . something like a face."

Something like a face?

Starnes was feeling the dread now, too.

His training was failing in every conceivable way as something primal and haunted rose up from the cellar of his mind. He thumbed the keypad.

"Professor Borden? Dr. Bob? This is Polaris. Please respond. Over." He waited, feeling the steady tap-tapping of his pulse at his temples. "Borden? Dr. Bob? This is Polaris! Respond immediately! *Goddammit, do you hear me? I said to respond immediately!*"

Something thumped against the side of the habitat.

It was not from the freezing temperatures or expansion. They both knew that as they stared at each other wordlessly. Something hit it again and with enough force that the habitat trembled. Starnes's cup of coffee spilled and rolled off the desk.

"What the hell was that?" Kim whispered.

Starnes looked frantically around, trying to get his reasoning mind working again and having severe difficulty. He tried breathing in and breathing out, relaxation techniques. Good God, why was he letting it eat into him like this? He was in charge, he was in command. He was *supposed* to be the one with the cool head.

Kim kept staring at him, seeming to gauge her own nerves by what she was seeing of his. She listened to the static coming over the radio. Was it her imagination or did it seem louder?

She cocked her head, intent on hearing it.

What she heard then was a woman's voice, clear, crisp, the tones throaty and almost seductive: *"I'm coming now... wait for me . . ."*

Kim screamed again.

She had never been a hysterical female. She had worked remote camps and unforgiving environments, wintering in the Artic and Greenland with tough all-male teams. Never once had she shrank away from any of it. But the scream that came out of her was purely involuntary: absolute animal fright.

Starnes grabbed her now. "Kim! Get a hold of yourself."

She trembled in his grip. "Didn't you hear it? That voice on the radio?"

"There was no voice. Do you hear me? There was no voice."

She pulled away from him. She was losing it. After all these years, she was actually losing it. Hallucinating. But that voice . . . it had sounded so

real, so completely evil.

There was a pounding at the outer door.

It went on and on with an almost mechanical cadence.

Kim and Starnes just stared at each other. There was no disguising the fear in their eyes, the absolute regression from reason to superstition. It was there: wild, electric, unbridled.

Starnes ignored the need to cling to her. It was strong, but he would not allow terror to rule him. "They're back," he said like he wanted to believe it himself. "Thank God, they're back." But even as the words came from his mouth you could hear the tone of his voice sliding from relief to something of a much darker variety.

He moved towards the door.

"No!" Kim said. "Don't open that door! Do you hear me? *Don't open that fucking door . . . it's out there . . .*"

Starnes stared at her a moment, trying to think of something reasonable and reassuring to say and failing. He opened his mouth, then shut it again. This was silly. Like a couple kids shivering after a good ghost story, afraid of what might drag itself from the closet, yellow-eyed and red-toothed.

"Don't!" Kim shouted, beyond herself with fear.

And on the radio the static rose up as did that droning, rising and falling in eerie, wavering cycles. And then something else: *"Let him go, Kim... we don't need him . . ."*

Kim backed away, shaking uncontrollably. "No, no, no–"

"*Soon it'll be just you . . . and me . . .*"

Starnes marched over to the entrance, knowing that this was an acid test of his ability to command and maybe something more: his ability to be a man and do what had to be done in a crisis situation.

He popped the airlock.

He heard Kim make a whiny, pleading sound behind him.

He opened the outer door and peered out into the gusting, howling blackness of the Antarctic night and saw . . . nothing.

There was no one out there.

Kim backed away further, feeling it coming, feeling it building in the air like some unknown charge of potential energy was about to go kinetic. That whatever was out there was about to show itself and be heard in some colossal deafening eruption like a sonic boom–

Starnes cried out and was . . . *gone.*

She saw it happen.

It was not the wind that got him, it was something else.

He had been *pulled* away into the darkness.

22

POLAR CLIME STATION

THE WIND WAS TALKING, whispering, drawing her out.

Cassie Malone knew that the wind did not have a voice, even though down on the Ice sometimes it sounded like it . . . like it was moaning out there, calling your name, and on especially windy nights, screaming like a woman.

But tonight, it *really* did have a voice.

She listened to what it said. Listened to it sing a dirge, a saga of primeval memory of this land before the ice came, of things so distant that no human eyes would ever look upon them. It knew things, it sang truths. It peered right into the dark and diseased heart of her trauma and fear and sang of peace and ages unfolding.

It told her that fear was only a survival mechanism implanted in the human psyche and that it was also a control, something that could drain the human mind at the first sign of defiance. But it also told her that there was nothing to fear if she did as it said.

If she answered the ancient summoning.

And she believed it, for this night the wind had a voice and that voice was for her alone.

It was so lonely and old and wise. Listening to it was like mainlining something pure and fierce and forever.

Outside . . . come outside and know us, said that windy, melodic voice. *Come unto us and we will give unto thee a seamless beauty beyond imagining.*

So Cassie, knowing it was right, did what it said.

Hurry . . . you must be quick before they see you. They cannot know. This is a secret.

Escaping was simple.

Cassie followed the voice through the wall where the angles met and jumped through fourth-dimensional space and then . . . and then . . .

Outside: In the security lights, snow-devils twisted through the compound and the wind pushed drift into the lights.

Oh, the wind was biting, cold, cold, cold.

She was wearing only slippers, jogging pants, and a hoodie.

It was twenty below zero out there.

She did not know where she was going.

She was only following the voice.

Follow me, follow me, follow follow follow me.

And under her cold-cracking breath, a tiny and childlike voice asked: "Are . . . are you a ghost?"

We are something much older than ghosts.

Shivering, disoriented, knowing only the voice, Cassie jogged out past the Fuel Depot, slipping and sliding on the ice, and the wind kept trying to push her back, but she would not be pushed back for the song on the wind was like tinkling silver bells now rising into a sweet and resonant crescendo.

She ran faster, falling, getting up, falling.

She was out on the ice road near the runway now, calling out to the wind, begging it to show itself. Hypothermia was setting in and her mind was fogged, confused, a whirlwind of fairy tale imagery that spun and danced and cavorted . . . but for all its phantasmagoria and sparkling Technicolor beauty, there were dark spaces and pooling shadows from which red hungry eyes peered out and white, frozen fingers seemed to beckon.

But she could not let the song be broken.

I will die without the song! I will die . . .

Here were warm-up shacks and storage Quonsets. The wind was whipping fiercely. The snow flying. The shadows pushing in. Cassie's limbs felt numb, sluggish. There was no feeling in her face. She was sheathed in rubber, cold thick rubber.

And then–

Here, my child, here...

She saw a figure come drifting out of the snow and darkness.

A woman.

A woman in a white dress that flapped and flowed around her. Cassie stumbled in her direction, towards her outstretched arms. A woman that looked oh so much like her mother . . . but she had red eyes and those reaching things were not hands and then Cassie went down on her knees, crunching against the granite-hard snowpack and saw what it was that had summoned her.

Oh God not this, not this.

I remember

I remember the touch of them

From long ago

The fear-haunted forest, the swarm brings pain, welcome to the house of pain-Before her: a towering alien shape with fanning leathery wings and fleshy eyestalks and those red, red, burning eyes. It moved towards her.

Cassie felt an absolute wild terror seize hold of her, one that was not remotely refined or cultured or necessarily human. This was animal: pure, savage, feral. Like her mind had sucked into itself, careening madly into some bottomless pit with the trajectory of a bullet.

Before her, the shape reached out to her, to take her, to–

(no no no no keep away get away not touch not touch)

—pull her screaming into itself, into the buzzing dead-end nothingness of itself, the shrieking iron silence of its consciousness-

(no not touch the pain oh oh oh THE PAIN!!!)

—and make her part of the whole, part of the many, part of the hive.

Something broke loose in her brain like a seizure, making her limbs quake and her head thrash violently from side to side.

She threw herself to the ice, growling low in her throat, part-terror and part-rage. She crouched like a wolf readying to spring. She would attack. She would defend herself against the Other–

Then *a sudden high-pitched whine opened up in the back of her skull, reverberating through her brain and everything went limp and flaccid within her. Defiance was not allowed and she knew it as she trembled on the ice, limbs shaking, eyes rolled back in her head, teeth biting into her tongue, blood running from her nose, bowels emptying themselves with a not-unpleasant smell of animal scat and glandular excretion.*

Disobedience replaced with a warm gush of compliance, she lay there curled up on the ice, whimpering deep in her throat like a whipped puppy as the shape took her away into secret channels of darkness.

23

NOAA FIELD STATION POLARIS

THERE WAS SOMETHING WRONG.

Borden knew it the moment the rope jerked in his hands and with enough force that he lost his grip on it and had to dive to the ice to recover it.

And by then it had gone limp.

He knew he was late calling into the habitat but he did not dare let go of it. For some reason this seemed of paramount importance to him. It was all that really connected him to Dr. Bob and, God help him, he would not sever that tie.

He pulled himself to his feet.

No easy thing with that howling wind trying to drive him to his knees, throwing grains of ice and whirling flakes of snow in his face. Steadying himself, leaning into the wind the way Dr. Bob had taught him, he began taking up the slack. He ducked under the guide rope and then it was easier to begin reeling it in.

The slack only meant that Dr. Bob was on his way back.

That's all it meant.

But as he listened to the scream of that black wind and felt the absolute polar desolation around him, the cold beginning to make his limbs feel numb and heavy, he did not really believe that. He was remembering Andrea standing at the window . . . was that last night? Tonight? How could you tell with the constant darkness? He could see her standing there, somehow forlorn and withered, the youthful bloom to her cheeks replaced by something sallow and wizened.

I like to listen to the wind. It sounds like voices sometimes.

And it really did, didn't it?

As he took up the slack, Borden was listening to it.

He was hearing something out there, sort of a droning sound like static rising and falling and the more he listened the less it sounded like static but almost like a voice . . . a woman's voice . . . singing out there in the belly of the storm. A melancholy sort of song borne by the winds, its epicenter being the very black heart of the unearthly devastation which swept the ice.

Death.

That's really what he was thinking.

It was a song of death sung by the siren which had lured so many to bleak polar tombs beneath the ice. A screaming, malevolent white death that was coming to suck the warmth from him–

Stop it. Concentrate.

He reeled in more slack.

The storm was right upon him now and no longer did the squalls clear enough so that he could see the habitat. He was alone. Marooned in this glacial hell where men did not belong.

The weather is funny out on the plateau, he could hear Dr. Bob saying. *Be prepared. Summer, winter, it doesn't matter. Prepare for the worst. When you go out to the coring sight, keep survival in mind. Because all it takes is one nasty storm to deliver you into the hands of Hell. Stay on the flagged pathways, use the guide ropes. We put them up for a reason. And if you ever start feeling dopy or dreamy, it's hypothermia settling in, so call for help, follow the guide ropes.*

Borden suddenly seemed to realize what was at stake.

He made sure the guide rope was still at his back and began reeling in the rope with renewed fervor. He looked down at his bunny boots in the beam of his light and realized that, yes, he had been losing it there for a minute because he probably only pulled in maybe fifteen or twenty feet of rope.

Work it, man! Help Dr. Bob out!

He was yanking the rope with everything he had. The exertion warmed him and woke him up, his senses alert and sharpened. He pulled in more

line and soon there was a growing spool at his feet. Had to be forty feet now, more likely fifty.

The wind slammed into him, blasting him white with snow. He clawed it away from his balaclava and started pulling again. The rope came easily and then it went taut with incredible force, nearly pulling his arm out of joint.

But he did not let go.

He could not let go.

The rope laid limp for a moment, then it jerked rigid, began whipping from side to side. Borden lost his balance and fell to the ice.

What the hell is going on?

He grabbed the rope again, glad that he had mittens and polar gloves below or it would have peeled the flesh from his palms.

"BOB!" he cried. "BOB! I'M OVER HERE! BOB!"

The rope went crazy, pitching him this way and that and it felt crazily like he had the mother of all trophy swordfish on the other end. It slid through his mittens, snapping and jerking. It took every bit of strength he had to fight against it. He pulled it back, using his strength and weight, and the rope was tight feeding out into the storm as if it was looped around something immoveable like a tree.

It jerked again.

And again.

"BOB!" Borden shouted into the storm. *"BOB!"*

The rope whipped again with incredible force and he clung to it with steely determination. He was lifted eight feet in the air and dropped to the ice.

Right away, sitting there on his ass, he pulled the rope in.

It was limp.

He kept reeling and reeling and there was weight on the other end, but not enough to be Dr. Bob. Something had happened. Something terrible. Somehow the rope must have broken loose and left him stranded out there.

Borden pulled the rest in, knowing he would simply tie it around himself and go find Bob. It was secured to the pathway so he had nothing to worry

about.

The end of the rope came skidding into view.

It was looped around something.

Borden saw it and screamed.

Just a mitten of the sort Dr. Bob had been wearing and jutting from it, a jagged stump of wrist.

Borden crab-crawled back towards the pathway, pulled himself to his feet, and gripped the guide rope. He began following it back to the station at a frantic pace, trying to shut out everything but survival, and particularly the idea that something was out there, something malefic and loathsome that was closing in on him.

Something so deranged it had taken the time to tie Dr. Bob's severed hand to the end of the rope.

24

KIM PENNYCOOK WAS ALONE.

It had taken every last bit of strength she had to seal the airlock and crawl back to her corner by the radio where she waited now, trembling, listening to the night which she knew without a doubt was also listening to *her.*

The wind blew.

The habitat shook, the walls rattled.

And Kim sat there, riding a rising tide of black fear and dementia, no longer certain what was real and what was nightmare fantasy. She had always been a strong, determined, and resilient woman, but all that was gone now.

She was a child.

She was frightened.

She was alone.

There was only the black breath of the storm outside and the white, fragile silence within her own mind now. She had been laid bare, adult logic and reasoning reduced to a simple adolescent level of pure unreasoning superstitious terror. For a child's mind, unencumbered by adult experience and rationale, was a simple thing. The rustling in the closet was indeed the boogeyman. That scraping beneath the bed was certainly a monster. And the wind howling along the eaves was without a doubt the voices of disembodied spirits.

Kim teetered uneasily between the adult world and that of the child.

Terrified, everything inside her pulled tight, she could only listen.

The lights flickered.

She gasped. Not the dark, oh no, not in the dark–

The radio crackled with static. “Poor Kim . . . all alone,” the voice said, velvety like the whisper of funeral satin. “They’re all dead now and you’re all alone. All . . . alone.”

Kim shook violently. “No . . . no . . . go away.”

There was a breathing silence over the radio, then an odd metallic scraping sound like a shovel against a tomb lid. “I can help you . . . but you have to let me . . . you have to want me to . . . do you want that, Kim?”

Her breath coming in sharp, short inhalations that made her head spin, Kim covered her ears with her hands, her eyes wide and wet and stunned-looking. She felt cold and stiff, her body crawling with gooseflesh . . . every inch of it.

Even through covered ears, the voice was heard.

It sounded less sultry and seductive now.

Less girlschool friendly.

Now it was ancient and scratching, cancerous with vile corruption: “Don’t wait too long, Kim . . . because IT’s out there and IT can come in if it wants to . . . IT can get you like it got Andrea and Dr. Bob and Starnes . . . IT knows where you are and IT can find you, make you scream the way they screamed–”

“Go away! Go away!” Kim sobbed. “Just leave me alone!”

More static punctuated by that weird droning noise that seemed to come from impossible distances and echoing black gulfs. Nothing but the static.

Then the voice: “Let me help you before IT comes for you.”

“No.”

“All you have—”

“Please go away.”

“—to do, Kim, is—”

“Stop it, stop it!” she said as tears rolled down her face.

“Ask.”

25

BORDEN PULLED HIMSELF FORWARD, hand over hand with the guide ropes, the black flags flapping in the wind like aerial pennants. The closer he got to the habitat—and he could not see it, not yet—the wilder the storm became until it seemed a raging, hateful tempest that existed only to defeat him, to stop him dead in his tracks so the snow could lay a silent and deathly shroud over his remains.

He knew he was not alone out there.

Now and again, deep in the roaring blackness of the storm, he could hear that voice calling to him, singing that melancholy song that sounded to him like windy churchyards and echoing subterranean charnel depths.

He fought forward.

As he got closer to the habitat, the storm continued, howling in his face, almost determined that he would not escape its grasp.

Though he was a scientist, his science had abandoned him now and he fully believed that the storm was not some freak occurrence, but something engineered for his benefit.

He pulled himself on.

He would not give in.

He could not afford to give in.

All around him, shapes were moving, trying to draw his attention. But it wasn't far now. Not far at all.

26

THE AIRLOCK HISSED.

Kim stood there in her ECWs, her eyes glazed, her mouth hanging slack.

"That's it, Kim. I'm out here. Waiting. I'll help you."

Kim opened the outer door and the wind yanked it from her mittened fingers, letting it pound against the outside of the habitat. The wind pulled her out into the storm. It filled the habitat, knocking books from shelves and creating a tornado of papers and plastic coffee cups and anything that wasn't tied down.

Stepping across the hardpack, Kim could feel her heart pounding like a drum. Inside her ECWs, she was sweating. Perspiration rolled down her spine and dampened her thighs and ran trickling between her breasts.

"You're so close now, Kim, you're so very close."

Kim circled around the habitat, snow and ice particles swirling around her as fierce gusts tried to drive her back.

She smelled a stink like rotting fish heaped on a dead beach. It made no sense. Even though her mind had spiraled into some bottomless abyss within, it still knew that such an odor in the glacial air of the South Pole made no earthly sense.

"You're so close I can almost touch you," the voice said inside the drum of her head and she knew that's where it had been speaking from all along.

Kim moved forward.

A shadow passed by her, vanished into the storm.

She thought she heard a peal of cold laughter.

But it was the wind. It had to be the wind.

"Just a little farther, Kim . . . a . . . little . . . farther . . ."

She had passed the habitat now, stepping out onto the polar plateau where the winds found her, enshrouding her in snow, owning her, and cutting off any chance of retreat.

Something brushed against her.

She whirled around, her mind a flat and lifeless thing in her head.

Then the voice, scratching and horrible: *"I'm right behind you, Kim."*

She turned and something leaped out of the darkness at her.

She saw eyes that were a luminous yellow and a blurred liquid face like something grotesquely distorted in a funhouse mirror and then hands like gnarled gray roots took hold of her.

Kim's last sight was her own blood steaming hotly on the ice.

27

BORDEN SAW THE LIGHTS.

A strangled cry of hope came from his throat. He was going to win this one. He was going to survive this and lock the habitat door and, so sorry, but fuck Andrea and fuck Dr. Bob. That door would not be opened until a relief team from Polar Clime arrived.

Oh, Borden could already see them. Tough, burly, foul-mouthed Antarctic vets who would know what to do.

He pulled himself along the guide ropes.

The voices died out.

That's how he knew he had won.

He stumbled across the ice, a few more feet, that's all. He fell, slipped and fell again, pulling himself up, banged and bruised but making for the door.

It was wide open.

As was the airlock.

He fell through it.

The common room was a maelstrom of blowing wind and spinning debris, snow blown over the floor and sculpted in runnels along the walls.

He smelled a hot, toxic dead fish odor.

But only part of his brain recognized this for the rest was too busy taking in what stood there, seven feet tall if it was an inch. It looked like a twisted dead tree that had grown up through the floor, its base a mass of coiling roots that were moving with a slow and fleshy undulation. It was blue-black in color, convoluted, made of some striated material like muscle fibers woven tightly together. It had a head with what looked like hundreds of writhing black tendrils like the snakes of Medusa rising up, brushing the ceiling, reaching out stiffly like hair charged with static electricity.

And it had a face.

An abomination with upturned yellow eyes and a jagged, sawtoothed Jack-o-lantern mouth filled with black spikes.

Borden made a whimpering sound and fell to his knees.

It hissed at him and reached out with all four of its wiry, rawboned hands that ended in black stick-like hooks. He thought it would kill him for not only did that hot stench of dead fish blow off it but it gave off a psychic emanation of pure festering evil. It would gut him. It would swim in his blood.

But it did not touch him.

It reached down and yanked up that which it had been feeding on.

The corpse of Kim Pennycook.

It held her up like some obscene marionette. She had been disemboweled, her throat gnawed to ligament and red-stained vertebrae. She was gored and ripped, her ECWs hanging in crusty, slimed threads. As it hoisted her up, her left leg fell off where it had been bitten through.

The thing hissed again and sank its teeth into her face, peeling it from the skull beneath with a horribly moist and juicy sound.

Borden crawled from the airlock.

He ran drunkenly from the habitat, only vaguely aware that he had pissed himself. He didn't bother with the guide ropes. He ran until he tripped on the ice and then he crawled, a mad and yammering scream coming from his mouth.

Lost in the storm, hiding in its folds, he curled up on the ice, his heart hammering and his breath coming in ragged gasps. The storm died out incrementally and by then it was clear and cold, auroras flashing blue and vibrant yellow-green high overhead.

And it was then that he became aware that he was no longer alone.

He lifted his head and looked upon what stood there.

Through squinting eyes he saw something tall and shadowy with a chambered oblong barrel-like body and night-black wings fanning out to either side like sails filled with wind. It stood upon a system of thick muscular tentacles. Its head was like a fleshy, puckering starfish, each one of

the five arms lying at a horizontal plane to the head itself and each ending in a globular red eye that was translucent.

Despite the state of his mind, Borden knew exactly what it was.

It was one of those things from Kharkov Station.

The creatures the NSF said did not exist.

It was looking at him with an intensity that made his skull ache.

"Oh . . . God," he uttered.

And the thing stepped forward with a slick, rubbery sound as Borden's mind went first black then entirely blank as a wave of agony sheared his thoughts, hot and cutting.

TWO

BLACK AS THE PIT FROM POLE TO POLE

I believe they have seeded hundreds of worlds in the galaxy with life and directed the evolution of that life. They have an agenda and I believe it is the subjugation of the races they developed.
—Dr. Robert Gates

1

POLAR CLIME STATION
MARCH 3

HIS FIRST WINTER-OVER ON the Ice, Coyle watched a heavy equipment mechanic named Creed go slowly mad because he claimed there was a ghost in his room. The ghost was a female and Creed said she had fallen through sea ice and drowned. He knew this because his bed was wet every night from the ghost woman laying in it. At night she would climb on top of Creed and try to suck his breath away like a cat licking the milk from a baby's mouth. Creed refused to sleep in that bed after this went on a couple weeks. And when the station manager refused to assign him a different room Creed stabbed him with a fork.

Creed was crazy, of course.

Everybody knew that.

Somewhere along the line he had developed something of a volatile and unsavory co-dependency with a rubber love doll named Maddie. What they did behind closed doors nobody really wanted to know, because what they did out in the open was bad enough.

Creed would bring Maddie into the dining area for supper and sit her at his table. During the meal, they would argue and Creed would get crazy mad and jealous, accusing his doll of flirting with other men. In a final dramatic climax to their relationship, Creed stabbed her with a steak knife and then surrendered himself to the NSF rep, saying that he was a murderer.

So when he stuck the fork in the station manager, there was no doubt that Creed was insane. Killing a love doll was bad enough, but stabbing the manager was something else again.

But sometimes things got a little weird during the long winters.

Minds that were not exactly balanced to begin with swung far to the right or left and sometimes, they just fell right off the beam and shattered

into a million pieces. Maybe it was the solitude and isolation and the knowledge that you were trapped in that cold white cage for months and there was no key to be had. Because once the planes stopped flying in March, you were there to stay.

Antarctica had a long history of madness.

And that stretched right back to the days of the early explorers when men just lost their minds and wandered out onto the ice never to be seen again and continued on in an unbroken lineage to the days of Byrd and Little America when overindulgence in medicinal alcohol turned parties to violent purges. And maybe all of that could have been attributed to the hardships of the early days, for death was always knocking on the door. Maybe this and the stress of living with it day in and day out. Maybe pent-up hostilities boiling over or simple manic despondency. A lot of things, really.

Except for the fact that it continued right to the present day, unabated.

People lost it on the Ice frequently and there was just no way around that. The NSF tried to sweep that kind of thing under the rug, but they could never make it go away. Whatever psychological aberrations people brought down there with them seemed to get amplified to a disturbing degree. And maybe that was because the Ice itself was like some great mirror that reflected the very dark truth of who and what you really were.

You had to look yourself in the face.

No more bullshit.

No more trifling civilization with its twelve-step programs, infantile support groups, or its I'm-okay-you're-okay half-assed Dr. Phil cult of self-denial, read my book and write me a check, honey, you'll be just fine. Down on the Ice, your strengths and weaknesses were on full display. And particularly during the winter when people didn't really have much else to do but scrutinize one another. They saw what you were about and, worse, so did you.

The blinders were off.

And sometimes when that happened, people just went crazy when they got a good look at the crawly things inside them while others simply accepted what they were and felt liberated finally, ultimately. Both workers

and scientists. That's why you'd get doctors down there that would get addicted to their own painkillers and relaxants or turn some cash trafficking the same. That's why women either spread their legs for free or turned a profit at it. That's why you'd get workers who developed complex, self-destructive dependencies with rubber love dolls or administrators that suffered persecution disorders and thought their rooms were bugged and the workers were united in their downfall. And that's why you got scientists that became inexplicably frightened of the dark or of Antarctica itself, convinced that there were disembodied intelligences out there trying to steal their minds.

Winter at the stations was a recipe for compulsion and obsession and plain old mental degeneration. When you packed people together in a box for five months in the utter blackness of the world's most unforgiving environment, you were asking for trouble.

Coyle had seen it before firsthand and he knew he was about to see it again.

Too many weird things were piling up. From the disappearances at Mount Hobb to the chopper crash to the megaliths in Beacon Valley and the others on Callisto. After the Callisto Party and what the crew saw on that NASA feed, anxiety levels went right through the roof and there was no going back.

Which was too bad, because Coyle had been hoping that this winter would be a smooth one. Oh, he had strong feelings to the contrary, but he had still *hoped*. Sure, Mount Hobb and the chopper crash and Slim's wild tales of something under that tarp and those damned megaliths in Beacon Valley . . . all of that was bad enough. But when the ice of Callisto vomited out those alien structures, there was no turning back. That little episode was a catalyst that got everything going.

The morning after, it was all people were talking about.

By afternoon, they refused to even mention it.

Maybe they needed to pretend that it hadn't happened or it had absolutely no significance for them. That there could possibly be no connection between the structures on Jupiter's moon and those in Beacon Valley. But there was a connection and you would have had to have been

pretty much blind or mindless not to see it or feel it and know that this was revelation unlike any the human race had thus far known. The connections were strung so tight and solid you could have tripped over them and broken you leg.

They were that real and that physical.

But, by that evening, just about everyone at Clime was pretending those connections were not there, carefully stepping over and around them.

Slim wasn't helping anything by telling anybody that would listen about what had been under that tarp. Horn was wisely silent about it, but not Slim. He'd been blabbing to Locke and Locke, of course, had woven it all together in the finest conspiratorial fashion and called for an emergency meeting of his little UFO study group which he called the PUFON, the Polar UFO Network. Something Frye referred to as *Poop-on*. Everyone seemed to have conflicting thoughts about the Callisto feed which really wasn't surprising. The most amusing was that of Harvey Smith, their communications tech. Harv thought it was all bullshit. Just movie FX stuff that the Freemasons had thrown together to frighten everyone.

Like he told Coyle: "I don't believe in little green men, Nicky, and especially if it turns out they're Masons."

Coyle didn't really know what Hopper or Special Ed thought about any of it and they weren't really saying.

So things were tense.

Then Cassie Malone turned up missing.

2

POLAR CLIME WASN'T THAT big.

Not as big as McMurdo, certainly, or even Pole Station. But it was easy to forget just how much of it there was until you had to cover it on foot.

The dome itself was laid out pretty much like a wagon wheel with the Community Room forming the hub. The spokes were the various corridors running off of it. A-corridor housed Medical, the offices of the station manager, HR and Safety, Emergency Supplies, firefighting gear closet. There were unsheltered walkways leading out from it across the compound to the Heavy Shop, garage, and Fuel Depot. B-corridor was mainly living quarters for the staff and crew. Coyle and Frye's rooms were in B. As were Hopper's and Special Ed's and the scientists. A walkway led from it to the main road that led to the warehouse and runway. C-corridor was the same. Crew's quarters. Gwen was here. As well as the other ladies. A long tunnel led from it out to the Atmospherics Lab. D-corridor housed the labs—Bio, Geo, Coring etc. There was also a hydroponics garden there where The Beav grew tomatoes, carrots, and beans. A tunnel led from it out to the CosRay Lab. E-corridor was mostly crew's quarters. Slim had had his there. Harvey was over there. As were Horn and Cryderman and the FEMC crew. The rest was storage. A tunnel led from it out to T-Shack, the Transmission Shack, where Harvey worked. This was the hub of radio transmissions at Clime. The lower level of the dome held more storage and the back-up generator, electrical substation, water recycling plant, and was also the where all the man-sized conduits that led to the outbuildings terminated.

There were plenty of places to hide when you came down to it.

And in the search for Cassie Malone none were overlooked.

Gwen, Zoot, Danny Shin, and Locke had already been over the dome once and now they were going over it again. Special Ed, Gut, and Hopper went room to room to room. Coyle and Frye handled the lower level. They

knew all the hiding places and conduits. Horn and a couple guys from the FEMC crew, Stokes and Koch, checked the outbuildings.

When they were done with the lower level and Frye had gone off to other pursuits, Coyle bundled up tight in his ECWs and checked the compound even though he knew it had already been checked. He looked for Cassie in the warehouse and Power Station. He nosed into all the little warm-up shacks and Jamesway huts and Hypertats of which there were a dozen spread over the perimeter of the dome. He even nosed around out at the Skua Pile, where people dumped anything they could not use or store, everything from chairs to bookshelves. Not garbage, just things that someone else might want to scavenge. He didn't know what he hoped to find, maybe Cassie's frozen corpse sprawled amongst abandoned bean bag chairs, picture frames, and laundry baskets.

Flashlight in hand, he circled the compound in the wind and icy blackness.

The only place he didn't check was Icebox Two, the old abandoned Navy weather station out on the plateau. But it was like a mile distant and hadn't been used since the 1970's. It was buried under a mountain of snow and ice. He didn't figure Cassie would have gone out there. At least not without a bulldozer.

Finally, putting it off long as he could, he went into T-Shack, passing the vast array of transmitters and forest of antennas that were enclosed behind a chainlink fence so some idiot didn't accidentally run a dozer into them. Taking the outer door, he came in out of the cold, puffing frost, his beard threaded with ice.

Harvey was at the console. When he saw Coyle come in, he jumped like a monster was stopping by for dinner.

"What . . . what were you doing out there, Nicky?"

Coyle breathed in and out, working the stiffness from his face. He set his long-barreled flashlight on the table near the door, studying the banks of communications gear, the walls and ceiling which were hung with wiring and cables. "I'm looking for something, Harv. You seem a little surprised to see me. Why is that?"

Harvey just sat there, eyeing him suspiciously. His face was flushed red. Even more so than usual. “Um . . . I . . . I guess you just surprised me. People usually take the tunnel out here. They don’t come in from the outside.”

“I dare to be different,” Coyle said. He pulled off his mittens and then the insulated gloves beneath. He rubbed his hands together, getting some warmth back into them. “You seen Cassie around?”

“No. She’s missing.”

“Yeah, I know she’s missing, Harv. That’s the point of searching for her.”

“Is that what you were doing out there? Looking for her?”

Coyle shrugged. “Maybe. And maybe I felt like a little walk.”

Usually, he handled Harvey with kid’s gloves. But not today. They had some seriously ugly shit about to bury them alive down here and still the petty nonsense went on unchecked. He just wasn’t in the mood for Harvey’s conspiracies about goddamn Freemasons.

He knew Harvey suspected him, so he went right over to him. Got in real close, enjoying how the man practically cringed. “You got much chatter out there today?”

“What do you mean?”

“What the hell you think I mean? C’mon, Harv, get a grip for godsake. What’s going on out there?”

Harvey swallowed. “Not too much. Pretty quiet out of McMurdo and Scott Base. They had some big winter carnival doings there last night. The lot of ‘em are probably hung-over. Pole Station had a power outage for two hours last night. They fixed it, though.”

“Nothing else?”

“Nothing else . . . except . . . well something’s going on out at that NOAA station. Not sure what and nobody’s saying.”

Coyle pretended it meant nothing to him.

The transmission room of T-Shack with all its assorted equipment only took up part of the building. The rest was made up by spacious living quarters because somebody always had to be on site to monitor the radio. Harvey and Cryderman, who absolutely despised each other, spent

alternating shifts out here. Harvey would only stay in his own room at the dorm, but Cryderman often lived in the spacious quarters of T-Shack for days on end. And why not? T-Shack had a full bar, pool table and pinball machines, an awesome DVD library and video game set-up. A fully stocked kitchen with every sort of convenience food known to man and the microwave ovens to cook them with. It was a nice set-up.

Coyle stepped out of the radio room, nosing around in the lounge and game room, the bedroom in the back, the kitchen. Found nothing but Cryderman's pyramids of beer cans, his collection of skin magazines and X-Box games. That was about it.

When he came back into the radio room, Harvey was watching him more intently than ever.

"What are you looking for?" he wanted to know. "Cassie never comes here."

"Maybe I'm not looking for her now. Maybe I'm looking for something else."

Harvey swallowed. "What might that be?"

Coyle just stared at him. "That's a secret, Harv. A big, scary secret."

With that he took the tunnel back to the dome, bundled up again, shoved some more Vaseline in his nose to combat the dry, cold air, and braved the icy darkness yet again.

The wind had subsided somewhat, but the temperature was still dipping at forty below. Outside the dome on the walkway leading to the garage and Heavy Shop, he just paused, looking around and even he wasn't sure exactly for what. He didn't honestly believe by that point that they would find Cassie.

So he stood there, studying the shadowy hulk of the dome behind him, T-Shack, and the garage in the distance. The security lights bathed them in pale orange light. A few flakes of snow danced in the illumination. No one was out and about. The sky over Clime was a black canvas speckled with the stars of the Milky Way and lit by shimmering bands of green, red, and yellow auroral light captured by Earth's magnetosphere in an impressive display. The colors winked off the dome and the roofs of the various

buildings. It was beautiful, but its stark beauty only illustrated how very isolated they were at the bottom of the world.

A place where people just disappeared into thin air.

3

MACRELAY, BUILDING 165,
MCMURDO STATION,
ROSS ISLAND

FOR DAYS NOW, SHIFT after shift at MacRelay, it was the same: Make contact with NOAA Field Station Polaris. They had dropped completely out of sight—or hearing—and the word had it that a Search and Rescue operation would be initiated. But before a SAR was launched, they gave it every chance.

Radio signals were notoriously FUBAR on the Ice. Magnetic interference. Atmospheric interference. Storms. Even solar flares played havoc with two-way communications. About the only thing that was reliable was SATCOM and then sometimes that hit the skids, too.

When he came on shift that night, Carl Royes, the radio tech, got on SATCOM and HF right away. "Polaris-one, Polaris-one, this is MacOps MacMurdo. Do you copy? Repeat: Do you copy? Please respond Polaris-one. Over."

Nothing.

He repeated the message seven times.

Royes knew there would be nothing. Even weird atmospheric and meteorological conditions cleared eventually and MacWeather was saying it was clear out on the plateau. They should have been reading. Either they had equipment failure or . . . well, it wasn't Royes job to speculate.

He got on the phone. "Mike? Still nothing."

"Okay," said the voice. "NOAA has been informed. Give Polar Clime a call, patch me through to Hopper. Somebody's got to go out to Polaris and check and Clime's the closest."

"They have choppers at Colony, don't they?"

The voice laughed. “Yeah, well, let’s leave those spooks out of it.”

4

POLAR CLIME STATION

"YOU HEARD?"

When Coyle got back to the dome, Frye was waiting for him just inside B-corridor. He had that look in his eyes that Coyle had learned meant trouble was at hand. Right away, he got a sinking feeling in his guts.

"Heard what?" Coyle said, pulling off his wool face mask and trying to work some heat into his numb cheeks.

"You know that NOAA field camp out on the plateau?"

He remembered what Harv had alluded to. That sinking feeling got worse. "What now?"

"MacOps hasn't heard from them in like four days. SAR time. Guess who pulls it?"

But Coyle knew. Clime was closest and in direct logistical and tactical support as far as MacOps was concerned.

"Hopper will send a crew in the morning," Frye said.

"You signing up?"

"Hell no, not unless I'm ordered."

Coyle knew that he was. He just had that feeling. He had the experience and Hopper would want him. There was dread in his belly at the idea of going, yet he knew nothing could keep him from it.

He said nothing for a time. His mind was filled with images of that place out on the ice shelf—stark, grim, and forbidding. Maybe it was nothing but radio failure, technical bugaboos . . . yet he could not bring himself to believe it. Not this year. The bad omens were everywhere and he was honestly starting to believe in things like that.

"If I go it'll get me off the search party for a day," he said. "Let's face it: Cassie is gone. We've been over this place like six times now. She's just . . . gone."

Frye nodded. "Any ideas?"

"None. She was at the Callisto party. Gwen had another party in her room. I was there. Zoot, the Beav, Slim . . . a few others. Cassie didn't show, Gwen said, because she wasn't feeling so good. Drunk. Wanted to lay down."

"And, *poof,* she's gone," Frye said, snapping his fingers. "No radios signed out. Horn says all the 'Cats and Skidoos are still in the garage. If she wandered off, she must have left the flagged path. Maybe fell into a crevasse. It happens."

"She's been on the Ice for three years . . . why would she do that?"

"People do funny things when they're drunk."

Coyle's eyes were still tearing from the cold, his nose running. He sniffed. "If we find her, she'll be a corpse. Hate to say it, but you know it as well as I do."

Frye let out a sigh. "Got people spooked. First those Brits from Hobb and now Cassie here. Wait'll they hear about the NOAA camp. That'll get 'em going."

"Sure."

"Could be a coincidence. Could be."

"I'm starting to not believe in coincidences," Coyle told him.

He didn't go into anymore detail about what he was hinting at, but he didn't need to because Frye read him just fine. The man nodded slowly, said, "Nicky, I was on the radio this morning with Art Fisher over at Pole Station. You know Art, right?"

"Fish? Sure. Got drunk with him once."

Art Fisher was a mechanic at Pole Station. Pole was several hundred miles from Clime on the polar plateau, sitting on a two-mile thick mound of snow and ice at the site of the Geomagnetic Pole itself. Fisher and Frye were friends. They both liked to refurbish classic cars and they got together on the radio once a week and discussed the internet auctions they had going on,

how hard it was to get a decent quarter-panel for a 1970 Charger or a '68 Buick Riviera.

"What about him?" Coyle said.

Frye just shook his head which meant it wasn't going to be good. He grabbed one of Coyle's arms with a grubby hand. "They had shit go down over there yesterday you ain't gonna believe. Real bad shit."

"Tell me."

"Well, Art said they had this beaker up there, this geophysicist name of Lewton. Funny sort. Spent his time over in the Dark Sector there playing with that Viper telescope trying to figure out whether the universe was expanding or compressing, probably just scratching his nuts mostly." Frye looked around like he was keeping an eye out for enemy agents. "So this Lewton starts getting real, real funny, you know? He stays over to the Sector and won't mix. Gets real paranoid. Starts watching everybody real close. Well, somehow he got himself a little Colt pistol over there. Maybe he bought it from one of the ANG pilots. Who knows? Well, yesterday, he walks into the dome and shoots this other Beaker named Rome about six, eight times. Kills him. Now get this. He says Rome wasn't human anymore. That something had taken him over. What do you think of that?"

Coyle just stood there. People vanishing and now murder. Christ.

The ball just wouldn't quit rolling here. He felt suddenly very tense, wondering if he'd ever truly relaxed since he'd heard about those megaliths over in the Sentinels or the mass disappearance at the Mount Hobb Station. Again, he had that sense that this was just another piece in one godawful puzzle that was slowly coming together. Right before the Callisto feed he'd had a funny feeling dug deep into him that something big and especially bad was about to happen. But the Callisto thing wasn't it. That was just another puzzle piece. Something else was coming, something was taking form all around them and he didn't want to think of what it might be.

5

EMPEROR ICE CAVE,
BEARDMORE GLACIER
MARCH 4

BIGGS WAS LISTENING TO the chatter coming in over the HF radio from Scott Base on Ross Island as he scratched another day off on the calendar above the transceiver. The Kiwis were really squawking over there. Apparently, twice in the past three days they lost power all over the station. They were scrambling to figure it out and had even brought in techies from McMurdo.

Like somebody threw a big switch, the guy on the box was saying. Didn't make sense.

Biggs grunted. "Welcome to Antarctica," he said.

The screen of his laptop told him it was a brisk -40° out on the Beardmore, but a reasonable minus ten inside the Emperor and a comfy +69° in the Hypertat where he was resting his rosy ass.

Just inside the mammoth mouth of the Emperor Cave, there were four high-tech Hypertats set up. And maybe Biggs didn't respect a lot about the NSF or the beakers that cracked the whip, but he absolutely respected the technology.

Minus forty out there. Brrr. And to think dickheads like Robert Scott and the boys had tented out in that weather. Jesus.

The Hypertats were really something.

They were essentially high-tech Quonset-shaped huts with their own generators, water supplies, and plumbing facilities. Inside they looked like something from *Star Trek* with their banks of instrumentation, computer workstations, modular living areas and fold-out bunks. When you were inside, you could almost forget you were down in Antarctica and maybe fantasize that you were deep in space or living in some futuristic Martian

colony. The Hypertats had kitchenettes and bathrooms, HF and sideband field radios and INMARSAT satellite hookups for voice and internet. They shook a bit when the wind blew through the cave mouth, but they were securely bolted to the ice and had backup systems to keep you warm, fed, and alive to the point of redundancy.

God bless the Hypertats.

Outside the Hypertat and the Emperor was the bleak and unforgiving territory of the Beardmore Glacier: a white wasteland of ice falls, pressure ridges, black razorbacked glacial moraines, and buckled crevasse fields sunken in a river of rippled blue ice. Only the highest frost-rimed mountain peaks broke through the ice cap. Drift blotted out the sky and the subzero winds were like knives. It was a merciless, savage, and frozen void.

About as close to hell as you'd ever want to go.

But in the Hypertat, inside the cave . . . livable.

The chatter from Scott Base faded out and the airwaves were suddenly dead. Not a peep from any of the stations on the band, nothing out of MacRelay, just static. Biggs had already put in his daily call to MacOps to let them know they were still alive and breathing up on the Beardmore. And Dryden's lower team down in the depths of the cave had already called in.

Nothing to do now but twiddle his thumbs.

Play some solitaire on the laptop.

In the back, Beeman was sleeping on his bunk and Warren had his headphones on, playing X-Box with that same blank expression that he went through life with. Fine and fine. Beeman was Navy, a lieutenant-commander, ramrod stiff with protocol shoved so far up his ass he could not breathe. And Warren? Nobody knew what Warren's thing was. He handled maintenance. Like Biggs himself, Beeman ran him. Yes sir, no sir, whatever you say, sir. Warren wouldn't have said shit with a mouthful.

Biggs, being the way he was, tried to stir up some revolt, but it just didn't work. "Hey, Warren," he'd say when Beeman was outside. "How do you like our commander? How do you like him riding you all the time?"

"I just do what I'm told," Warren would tell him. "That's why I'm here."

No, you couldn't get a rise out of Warren.

Everything was the same with him. Biggs, on the other hand, openly despised Beeman being in charge. The whole Emperor Project was Dr. Dryden's thing, but Beeman was the guy who made sure everything kept running and he treated Biggs like a common swab. Always on him. Always watching him.

Biggs wanted that kind of shit, he would've joined the Navy.

When he joined The Program, he'd been hoping for something different. He wanted to get away from the petty bullshit of the world. Antarctica. Frozen realm of white mystery. Sure. What he got was the petty bullshit of the world in a tight, condensed form replete with half-ass bureaucrats like Beeman.

But Antarctica *was* different.

If you liked the perpetual dark of winter. The overcrowding. The cold. The dryness that split your skin open. The isolation. The fucking desolation. Then, yeah, it *was* different.

Biggs wasn't crazy about the cold, but sometimes he got just plain shack-happy in the Hypertat and had to take a stroll outside in the ice cave, just for a breath of fresh air.

And, man, was it *fresh.*

Fresh the way air could only be in the coldest, windiest, and driest continent on the planet. You didn't dare step out there without your ECWs on and Vaseline shoved up your nose. The dryness not only burned your face and split open your lips, it liked to play hell with sensitive mucous membranes like your nasal passages. The moisture in your nose would freeze on contact with the glacial air and crack open . . . along with the tissues in there.

Just some of the things you had to remember at the bottom of the world.

Dress for the cold. Shove petroleum jelly up your nose. Lotion your dry skin daily. Keep the humidifier running. Make sure you sign out and take an emergency radio when you leave the Hypertat. And never, ever wander out of the cave into the Antarctic winter night alone. The winds and cold and blackness caught you out there, you were fucking toast.

You had to remember these things.

Just like you had to remember there was a pecking order. The beakers were the big wheels and you had to kiss their asses on a daily basis and snap to when some jarhead like Beeman started working that bug up his ass.

You didn't . . . well, then you'd end up like Biggs.

A guy who was not especially liked because he couldn't kiss ass properly, was not a team player, and had a real big mouth on him. And, according to Beeman, was also lazy, shiftless, and a general disappointment.

"Well, I sure as hell feel bad about that, Lieutenant-Commander sir," Biggs would say, paging through one of the fuck books he brought along. "Here I thought me and you were just starting to hit it off."

"You better watch that mouth, Biggs. Swear to God, you don't wanna push me."

"That's a roger, Big Chief. Consider my mouth being watched." Biggs would flip a few pages, never even looking at Beeman so Beeman would know that he was unimpressed with him, with the Navy, with the whole set-up. Not even worth paying attention to. A fucking gnat. And when Beeman stomped off, bitching about stomping civilian ass, Biggs would call out: "Anything else, El Kahuna?"

"Shut your mouth! How about that?"

And Biggs would salute him with a very limp-wrist. "Over and out, Big Chief."

And that, of course, made the red, white, and blue in Beeman's starched Navy-issue shorts run like water. And he would start reaming Biggs's ass on regulations, protocol, and NSF policy. The whole time he was being read out Biggs would keep up a running commentary on what he was looking at, which tits he liked and which he didn't and how the Lieutenant-Commander sir, ought to consider getting a set of tits in the spring, help him channel that aggression.

And that basically was their relationship.

If there wasn't blood in the offing by spring, Biggs was going to be real surprised.

Bored with solitaire, he surfed the web, checked out some porn and some NHL stats, then decided to send an email to his brother in Nevada. He

knew that the NSF spooks read every single email coming out of the stations and field camps so whenever he sent one, he made sure to mention something in there that would cast Beeman in a bad light. Something that would make his superiors cringe. Today he wrote his brother how he thought Beeman was gay, how he kept hitting on him and suggesting there was room for one more in his sleeping bag. Beeman would've vapor-locked if he read it, knew the shit Biggs was up to.

After that, nothing much to do but scan the bands, listen to Beeman snore, and check the forecast from MacWeather, think about what a long, long winter it was going to be and how he had volunteered for this shit. Back home, it was spring. Pretty soon the college girls would be on the beaches in their thongs. And while that was happening, Biggs would be marooned on the Ice with fucking Lieutenant-Commander Beeman, the poster boy for brainwashed military assholes everywhere.

He sighed.

He looked up at the map of the Beardmore Glacier on the wall. A black pin marked the location of the Emperor ice cave. It sat in a massive crevice known as Desolation Trough that cut nearly a half a mile into the glacier and looked much like a jagged scar on the topographical map. Desolation was capped off by the Cerberus ice falls, the peaks of Mount Wild and Mount Buckley rising in either direction.

"Desolation is right," Biggs said under his breath. He just wished something would happen.

Anything.

But out here in the ancient ice . . . what possibly could?

6

POLAR CLIME STATION

IN THE SUMMER THE stations were crowded.

You had two or three people living in rooms that were barely large enough for one. At a big station like McMurdo, which was more along the lines of a city, you had actual dorm buildings like you did at a college and dorm rooms were assigned by who you were and what you did, how many years you had on the Ice. And sometimes, of course, by who you knew and who you blew.

Generally, the administrators and high-ranking scientists got the best accommodations followed by your veteran contract workers. The fingies, new guys, got whatever the others didn't want. At a small station like Polar Clime, things could get extremely crowded in the summer. Not only did you have dozens and dozens of contract personnel, but beakers from all over the world studying terrestrial microbiology, paleontology, geology, glaciology, meteorology and upper atmospherics.

A madhouse.

But winter was different.

The station ran with a skeleton crew. In the summer there were over a hundred people at Clime, in the winter less than twenty-five. So even low-ranking fingies like Slim had their own rooms, such as they were.

When Coyle went to see Slim, he went over to E-corridor. His own room was over in B on the other side of the dome. He'd never been to Slim's room, but he knew he'd find it, all right.

And as soon as he cut down E all he had to do was follow his ears.

Slim was a metalhead and he had his music cranked up to a deafening level so that the floors were thumping with a staccato beat. He didn't listen to the heavy metal of Coyle's misspent years, stuff like Black Sabbath or

Judas Priest or Iron Maiden, but newer, cutting-edge brain damage thrash like Arch Enemy and Slipknot, some of which had lead singers that sounded like Satan vomiting his guts out. Coyle had once asked him if he ever listened to AC/DC and Slim admitted he'd never really heard of them. Which only went to show that even heavy metal had its generation gap.

Coyle pounded on the door and then pounded again.

Slim's door didn't open, but one down the way did. Harvey stuck his balding, round head out, his face stuck in a perpetual grimace as usual like he'd just bitten into a turd and couldn't get the taste out of his mouth. "Nicky!" he said. "Would you please tell that idiot to turn that garbage down? How am I supposed to concentrate here with that devil-music blasting? I'm writing a letter to mother."

"I'll talk to him, Harv."

Harvey's door shut without the slightest reference to the Freemasons. Maybe Harvey had decided that Masons weren't into metal, which meant that Slim wasn't one of *them*.

Slim answered the door with a dopey look on his face like he'd just smoked up some good bud. He wore an Atreyu sweatshirt, the sleeves pulled up to display all the skin tags, many of which he'd given himself.

Coyle tried talking, but it was pointless over the thudding music as some guy sang about pulling tapeworms out of asses. Slim turned it down and invited him in.

"I'm glad you came, Nicky. I gotta talk to you about some shit."

Coyle sat on the bed and stared at the walls. Slim had photographs of bands and goth prints up, mostly skulls and graveyards and the like. But now they had been covered over by drawings, dozens and dozens of them. Some taped or pinned right over the tops of others. Slim was a good artist and some of the inking on his own body was testament to that.

But what was all this?

All these hurried, weird sketches of things like cities clinging to mountain ranges and bizarre landscapes and nameless monsters?

"You been busy," was all Coyle said, not sure what he was looking at but beginning to get a very bad feeling about it like a father who'd discovered

drawings of eviscerated naked women in his son's notebook. Like those, these were disturbing. But unlike them, he just couldn't be exactly sure why. Only that there was something fevered and nightmarish about them. Very abnormal subject matter that made him think the mind that imagined them was equally as abnormal.

"We need to talk, Slim," he finally said.

Slim nodded, looking at the artwork. "Yeah, we do."

Coyle ignored that. "Now when we got back from the chopper crash, I had a little talk with you and Horn. You remember that? You remember what I told you guys about forgetting about what you saw? What was under that tarp? You told me you'd keep quiet about it, but now I'm hearing you're blabbing it all over camp."

Slim sank into the bed next to him. "I can't help it, Nicky. I really can't." He ran his fingers through his corn-yellow locks and down his face, pausing at the numerous metal studs pierced into his eyebrows and nose and lips. "I didn't want to do it . . . but I couldn't stop myself."

"Yeah, well, you've stirred up some shit now." Coyle sighed. "What have you been saying?"

"What I saw under the tarp. Everything."

"Well, that was pretty damn stupid."

"I know. I know it was."

Coyle just shook his head. Goddamn Slim was like a puppy you couldn't bear to discipline. Him with those big sad doe eyes. Harmless. Good-hearted, trusting, but terribly naïve. Around Clime a lot of people pretended not to like the kid, him and his piercings and devil-music and the tattoos sleeved over his arms and running up and down his legs and back, the purple or orange or green hair . . . but that was mostly bullshit. Slim was a good kid and you couldn't *not* like him. He grew on you. Maybe all the body art and studs and weird hair threw people off, but Coyle knew he was just indicative of his whole generation that saw the world they were going to inherit as a mass-produced, generic cesspool whose individual cultural personality was being eroded away by the information age into a gray, seamless mass, a global community that was the same everywhere. The tats

and piercings and extreme music were just a reaction to that, a way of conveying the individuality of youth, of raising your fist at the Man and yelling.

Coyle liked Slim.

He'd liked him the first moment he met him because he was warm and honest and open. The kid was twenty years his junior and sometimes Coyle almost felt like a father figure to him. The idea of that was not unpleasant. They made a very unlikely father and son. Where Coyle was stocky with dark, bushy hair and a closely-trimmed beard and a face ruddy from the weather, Slim was thin and pale and fair. Yet, there was a connection.

Slim sat there next to him for maybe five minutes as Coyle waited for him to open up like an oyster and produce a pearl. Because he would. And then he did.

"I didn't have a choice, Nicky," he said. "I . . . nothing's been the same since I saw that thing. I can't get it out of my head. I dream about it. I can't seem to think about anything else."

"I suppose you told Locke?"

Slim nodded. "Yeah. I did. And he told me things, man, things that explained it all."

"I bet he did."

Coyle looked at the drawings on the wall and then at Slim. The anxiety in him was growing by leaps and bounds. "Tell me about it."

Slim said that he couldn't help himself. He really couldn't.

He was fixated with that thing under the tarp. He had to tell people. He couldn't lock it up in his mind or he'd go crazy. The dreams started that first night, only they were unlike any dreams he'd ever had before. He saw that thing—that horror with the barrel-shaped body and red leering eyes set upon stalks—and others like it. He saw them swimming in deep green oceans and flying over weird jagged rooftops that he thought were part of some Medieval city like you see on TV. He saw them buzzing around megaliths like those in Beacon Valley and Callisto like wasps or hornets, gathering and swarming. And sometimes he dreamed of standing stones other places, in forests and deserts and hollows, and those things were there

and people were gathered around them, chanting in languages he'd never heard before but sometimes seemed familiar.

"And that city, Nicky," Slim said, trying to wet his lips, "I see it just about every night. It's really tall and freaky. It's like those megaliths, only bigger. It's made out of towers and pyramids and pipes and cubes . . . God, I don't know what. Only it's black and scary and leaning like it might fall over. I see it in the mountains and underwater and other places . . . like other planets or something where the sky is purple or brown or sometimes red. Those things are always there. Sometimes they're under the ice and they call to me. They want, oh Jesus Christ, Nicky, they want me to–"

"To what?"

"They want me to come to them." He buried his face in his hands and just trembled. "I think I'm losing my fucking mind, dude."

He began to sob and Coyle put an arm around him.

He sat there with the kid, wondering what he could say to make this better. Because those dreams were like the old stories that circulated through the camps of Antarctica and had for as long as men had been there. Alien things frozen in the ice and gigantic cities that had not been built by men. Those old yarns had been around a long time, but had gotten a real jumpstart after what happened at Kharkov Station five years before. Coyle didn't like to think about any of that nonsense . . . but he'd been thinking more and more about it all the time with all the strange things going on.

He left Slim on the bed and stood up, examining the drawings.

The sight of them made something inside him sink without a trace. Not good. Not good at all. The city was the subject of at least a dozen drawings if not more. It was seen from different perspectives, at a distance and close-up and even from far overhead. It clung to the mountain ranges—which looked suspiciously like the Transantarctics with their rising cones of black rock and snow belts—like some kind of growth: columns and cubes and oblongs and rectangles, spheres and branching spires. Not like a city men would build, but like some fantastic insect hive. Something about it filled Coyle with an uncanny sense of deja-vu like maybe he'd dreamed of places like this and more than once.

The monsters, then.

Yes, they were barrel-shaped like Slim said, both ends of which tapered. There were long tentacle-like arms at their bases and those bloated starfish heads with the brilliant red eyes at their apexes. They had limbs of some sort coming from their bodies, only they looked like tendrils or the tentacles of deep-sea squids that branched and then branched again into something like boneless fingers. Slim had drawn them in great profusion. They were flying over his nightmare city in the mountains and rising from great hollows and holes, spreading their huge wings.

The drawings that bothered Coyle the most were the ones that were supposed to be *inside* the city. Here the things were accompanied by people. Except the people looked almost like apes. They were crowded in cages and hung from wires in bunches; they were heaped in pits and floating in great vessels of fluid. And in one, a woman was strapped to a table and was being apparently dissected by the things.

Enough.

"Is this what you dream about?" he finally said.

Slim nodded.

"And you have ever since that day at the crash?"

"Ever since I saw that thing, Nicky. It won't get out of my head." He rubbed his tired, red-rimmed eyes. "You don't know what it's like. You can't know. When I saw that thing . . . man, it was like it saw *me,* too. Like it was looking at me, looking *right* into me. Like it knew me or something. And maybe I knew it. And I think it did. I think it knows all about every one of us."

He was breathing very hard, practically hyperventilating. Coyle stood him up and calmed him inch by inch. Christ, he was thinner than thin, pale and trembling, his eyes like red open sores. If ever Coyle had seen someone that was haunted, it was Slim.

"I got on the radio with my wife, Nicky."

"And?"

"And I told her about it. I told her all about what had happened, about the crash and that thing under the tarp."

Coyle sighed yet again. That was a bonehead move. A big one. The NSF monitored all communications coming out of the camps. There was no secret or spooky business to it, it was just one of their rules. Slim had just opened one smelly can of worms.

"There's gonna be trouble, Slim. The NSF will probably not invite you back."

"You think I give a shit about that, Nicky? I'd never come down here again for a fucking million bucks. I'd rather flip burgers or dig ditches. This whole continent is haunted or something." He breathed in and out very fast, his eyes wide and glassy. "You know what my wife told me? She told me she'd been dreaming of the city, too! And you know what's worse? You know what's even fucking worse?"

"Slim, take it easy, man. It's cool."

But it wasn't cool.

Slim was half out of his mind, his eyes blazing and his lips pulled away from his teeth like a dog that was ready to bite. "I don't know what the fuck is going on. I don't know how my wife is dreaming about that city. It's crazy. But what's worse is that my daughter, my four-year old daughter, brought drawings home from school. No, not the city. But those *things*. She's dreaming about them and drawing them! Now what the hell am I supposed to do? I'm stuck down here and shit is happening that shouldn't happen . . . *what the fuck am I supposed to do?*"

Coyle didn't know.

But the first place to start was at Medical, so that's exactly where he took Slim. To Doc Flagg for a shot of something to calm him down. And the really scary part was that all the way over there Slim was ranting and raving and not a single person asked why or offered to help. They just looked away like maybe they'd been expecting this and they were just glad it wasn't them.

7

AFTER THE CRAZY THINGS Slim had been saying, Coyle had a very nasty feeling that the entire world was suddenly on a roller coaster that was about to derail. He had been feeling that negative momentum at Clime and now, apparently, it had spread to the four corners of the globe. The question was: what could be done about it?

He didn't know, so he went to see Locke.

Locke loved it, of course. He loved it so much he broke out a joint and fired it up, despite the no smoking rules in the rooms. But Locke didn't care. He cared about very little that did not involve his generators or boilers or PUFON, his UFO/conspiracy study group which up until now had counted only The Beav, Ida, Lynn Zutema, and Slim among its members. The Beav loved anything counter-culture. Ida was a member because Locke served drinks at the meeting. Zoot supposedly had something going with Locke and Slim just liked anything weird or outlandish.

Coyle had a funny feeling that there were going to be more members real soon.

"So, you're starting to smell the shit cooking on the back burner, eh, Nicky? Decided you come see me? Crazy fucker like me is bound to have a few ideas. That what you were thinking?"

Coyle thought about being considerate of the man's feelings, decided there was no time for it. "Yeah, that's exactly what I thought. If it's crazy or fringe, I figured you'd know about it." He dropped into a recliner next to Locke's bed, took the joint that was offered. "Those megaliths are bothering me. The ones here and the ones on Callisto and the others all over the world. I'm seeing a connection between them and I don't care for it much."

Locke nodded. "Sure, sure, Nicky. The megaliths are a network. They have a purpose . . . only what might that purpose be?"

That was pure Locke.

Coyle had been to one of his meetings the winter before at Clime and Locke pretty much gave a lecture on how the Soviets had shot down alien spacecraft and were in possession of alien technology and a bunch of dead extraterrestrials to boot. Sort of the Communist Block version of Roswell and that business. After said lecture was completed, Locke let the others at the meeting speculate openly, very often becoming the Devil's advocate and stomping all over their theories mercilessly. For a guy that seemed convinced that we were not alone and that there were faces on Mars and ancient civilizations beneath the polar ice cap, he was damn skeptical.

And that was the primary reason that Coyle did not dismiss the man out of hand. Because as goofy as some people thought he was, he was essentially open-minded and his study group was a forum for intellectual discussion . . . even if people tended to show up just because he had really good dope.

"I don't know what their purpose is, Locke. But I'm beginning to think that they do have one. That's why I came here. I thought you'd have some crazy bugaboo bullshit to explain it."

"It's good to be needed."

"I'm serious."

"So am I, my friend. Just glad you still have faith in me after I threw a fit when NASA cut our Callisto feed."

"You think they cut it on purpose, don't you?"

"Is there any doubt?"

Nobody at Clime doubted Locke's ability to handle the Power Station or that he was the key man that would keep their white asses rosy and toasted, keep the lights on and the fires burning. He was good at his job. Which is why he was always invited back by the NSF and its support contractors. Maybe he got a little strange with his UFOs and conspiracies, but he was harmless. He just wanted answers and he firmly believed that there were people in power that had them. Sometimes people kidded him, but when he talked, they listened. Even Frye would listen and Frye had little patience or respect for anyone.

Coyle genuinely liked Locke.

He was way out sometimes, but he had a good head on his shoulders for the most part. And he was fun. He really got into the theme parties and made sure everyone else did, too. Last winter at Clime, they had a Holy Grail theme party. They'd watched *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* again and again. Everybody was drunk and rowdy and out of control in their makeshift Medieval robes and cloaks and tinfoil armor, brandishing cardboard swords about. Locke went beyond that, as usual. He had proclaimed himself one of the Knights that Say "Nee" from the movie. Just stoned to the gills in his black robe and towering cardboard headpiece, he went around demanding shrubberies and saying "Nee" when anyone tried to talk to him. It was hilarious.

But theme parties, like laughter, seemed to be a thing of the past now.

"Tell me, Nicky," Locke said, pulling off his joint and brushing a hand over his buzz cut. "Do you see any other connections here? Other events that seem to be part of greater whole?"

"Sure. I see them everywhere I look. People disappearing from Mount Hobb. The megaliths over in the Sentinel Mountains. The chopper crash. What Slim and Horn saw under that tarp. Colony Station . . . do I need to go on?"

Locke shook his head. "No, you don't. Honestly, Nicky, I don't know what's going on anymore than you do. But I came this year because I knew this was going to happen. After the Kharkov thing, I knew things were ready to escalate out of control."

"And you think that's happening now?"

"Yes. And so do you or you wouldn't be here, my friend."

Well, Coyle couldn't argue the logic of that.

Frye liked to call Locke a comic book nerd, but Locke was hardly that. With his buzzcut and team sportswear on, he looked much like the jock he was who played basketball and soccer and tennis in his free time, had pulled a tour with the Marines and lettered in no less than four sports in college. He even had a black belt in Aikido. But for all his impressive physical acumen, Locke's mind was sharp as a tack and it was his fiercest weapon.

"Nicky, you were down here when that business at Kharkov happened, weren't you? I didn't get on the Ice until the next year, but you were here."

Coyle nodded. "I was at McMurdo that winter. There'd been some strange shit coming in on the radio from Kharkov. We all knew something was brewing there, we just didn't know what. You know what I remember most?"

"What?"

"How tense things got at MacTown. It was spooky."

Coyle told him about it.

If you'd spent any time on the Ice, then you got to hear a lot of strange stories about ghosts and dead civilizations and all that. Things like that had been floating around since the days of Scott and Amundsen and even the early whalers and seal hunters. But nobody paid much attention to it until the events at Kharkov Station five years previous. It had been a bad winter. Stories were filtering out about Dr. Gates finding the ruins of a pre-human city and alien mummies in the ice and then other stuff about another city beneath Lake Vordog, which Kharkov sat on top of. A team had drilled through the ice and seen things down there in that lake. Things that were *not* mummies.

"Everyone got spooked. And I mean *spooked.* It was scary business," Coyle told him. "Then we started hearing that Kharkov was in trouble. That people were going mad over there. I remember that there was a team at Pole Station that was ready to go to Kharkov and effect a rescue, but the NSF said absolutely not. Which we thought was outrageous. I didn't take any of it too seriously until word leaked that everyone was dead but Jimmy Hayes, the boiler engineer, and Sharkey, the camp doctor. When I heard what Hayes was saying, I started to take it real serious."

"Why?"

Coyle swallowed. "Because I knew Hayes. I'd wintered with him at Palmer Station and summered with him at Pole. Hayes was a tough, capable sonofabitch, Locke. He was sturdy stuff. If anybody else had been saying stuff about aliens, I wouldn't have believed it. But Jimmy Hayes? No, he was the real thing."

"Nobody knows where Hayes and that doctor are now, do they?"

"Nope. Word has it they went into hiding to avoid all the newspaper people and weirdos that wanted their story. I heard they went to Mexico, but who knows?"

Locke pulled off his joint, roached it when Coyle said he'd had enough. "Now you know, of course, what Hayes and Dr. Sharkey were saying?"

"Yeah, I remember their original statement. They said they found everyone dead at Kharkov. They didn't know why." Coyle laughed. "Nobody bought it, of course. With all those wild emails and radio transmissions coming out of there, it all seemed too pat. Nobody was buying it."

"Then, Hayes and Sharkey retracted that and wrote a statement," Locke said. "And that statement landed like a bomb. You remember what it said?"

How could he forget?

It was heady enough stuff for the rest of the world and absolute nectar for the conspiracists, but for the people who lived and worked in Antarctica it was dynamite. And especially those who knew Hayes and Sharkey. Knew they were solid and practical people. That's what was so damn hard about it. Their statement confirmed that Dr. Gates and his team had indeed found a gigantic series of ruins in a massive subterranean chamber. That those ruins were not of human origin. That there were alien beings there. Some of them were mummies and some of them were very much alive.

That, of course, was enough to kick the legs out from everyone, but then Hayes and Sharkey said they'd found evidence that Antarctica was the cradle of all life on Earth. That these aliens had engineered life in the primeval oceans of Earth during the Archeozoic Era, some three-to four-billion years ago. And more startling, that they created life and seeded the planet with the sole purpose of bringing forth *intelligent* life.

Intelligent life that they could exploit or harvest. Crazy shit.

And what was the aftermath?

Well, on a worldwide scale it went from panic to outright dismissal. There was no evidence, so Hayes and Sharkey were written off as cranks. Hayes said he had blown up the cavern leading to the ruins. If there had been an opening, it was now under a mountain of rock and ice. And the NSF

stated clearly that there was nothing at the bottom of Lake Vordog but some simple life forms, all very terrestrial in origin, but certainly nothing from another world. After that, investigators of every stripe swarmed to Antarctica and found nothing that would support the claims of Hayes and Sharkey.

"When it all came out, you told people you worked down here, they made alien jokes and said take me to your leader. All that fun stuff," Coyle admitted.

"People believe what they want to believe, don't they? As you may recall, Nicky, organized religion refuted all of this outright. And why not? It destroyed the very basis of a superior being, a god-like creator. Politicians didn't care for it much either. Nor did your average Joe on the street. And you couldn't blame them really. Who wants to think that everything we are has been engineered? That even our culture and gods are just based on archetypes those aliens imprinted in our minds? I don't care for it much myself and neither would any other rational person."

Coyle just sat there, staring at the UFO and megalith posters on the walls, the books on the shelves: *Arktos: The Polar Myth,* Bernard's *The Hollow Earth,* Kafton-Minkel's *Subterranean Worlds,* and Farrell's *Reich of the Black Sun.* All of these and more sandwiched in-between books on alien abduction, extraterrestrial intelligence, life on Mars, and UFO studies.

Usually, he got a big kick out of Locke, but today he found him depressing. Science fiction and scary stories and weird urban legends were all fun, but when they started becoming real the fun definitely ended. Locke liked to talk about offbeat Antarctic myths and tales and theories: alternate civilizations beneath the ice caps, the Nazis building fortresses under the ice, hollow earth theories, or even Admiral Byrd's supposed claim of seeing an ice-free land peopled by primitive humans and huge shaggy prehistoric mammals during a solo flight over the Pole.

"But the megaliths . . ." Coyle said, not wanting to really proceed with any of it.

"Yes, the megaliths."

"Give me your take on them. Did these aliens build them?"

Locke considered it a moment. "Yes and no. The ones on Callisto, surely, and the ones in the Beacon Valley without a doubt. But Stonehenge and the others? No, I don't think so. *We* built them. But I think we built them because they *wanted* us to. They implanted something in our minds that came to the fore at a particular moment in our intellectual development, roughly ten-thousand years ago. The megaliths were erected by Neolithic peoples who no doubt thought they were building them for religious reasons. And, in a way, they probably were."

"But what *is* their purpose?"

"I don't know." Locke was silent a moment and unlike other times when he talked about these things, he didn't seem to be enjoying himself at all. "Remember what Hayes and Sharkey said? That some of what they knew came from firsthand experience, but the majority was from Dr. Gates's laptop? The NSF confiscated that. If there was anything on it, it was never made public. But according to them, Gates believed that there were things these aliens—which he called the 'Old Ones' or the 'Elder Things'—buried in the human race, controls or mechanisms, that would awaken at the proper stages of our mental evolution. Some of these would have been to build the megaliths. Another, Gates believed, was that we would be drawn to Antarctica, drawn to our makers, drawn to the last surviving colony of those things. And we have been. He believed none of it was accidental, all was design. That when our populations achieved a suitable size and complexity and intellectual level, they would awaken other imperatives within us. Imperatives they would unlock on a global scale. Imperatives that would make us like them, psychic brothers, and allow them to harvest us."

"And?"

Locke licked his lips, looked Coyle dead in the eye. "I think it's beginning now. We saw a stirring of it at Kharkov five years ago. The beginning of it. A trial run, so to speak. But now it'll be the real thing. A global awakening. You can think that's hoodoo bullshit if you want, but what's happening at megalith sites around the world confirms this. Something is about to happen, Nicky, something immense and ugly. And when it happens, the human race as an independent body will cease to exist. The Old Ones will own us. We'll be pulled into the greater whole of them and I don't honestly believe there's a fucking thing we can do about it."

Coyle didn't speak for a moment because his breath didn't want to come. It was like the world was unraveling around him. "You know what, Locke? You sure know how to ruin a good buzz."

"Enjoy your buzz while you can," he said with all due seriousness, "because by this time next year, human things like getting high and screwing for pleasure rather than stock and even freewill itself will be a thing of the past."

8

MARCH 5

COYLE DID NOT SLEEP well that night.

Every time he closed his eyes he had images of those aliens. He'd never actually seen one, but he'd heard enough descriptions and had seen Slim's drawings so the images of those hideous things leaped into his mind quite easily. And he had to wonder, with what Locke told him, if those images had not been there all along . . . just waiting to surface.

Regardless, they haunted what little sleep he did get.

Gwen showed up around midnight, but even spending the night with her did little to ease his mind.

The next morning the temperature was a balmy 30 below with a shrieking wind that made the windows rattle. Nothing special there. As he made breakfast for the crew—fried bacon and stirred a cauldron of hash browns and whisked pancake batter—he watched them come in, wondering if they were feeling any of what he was feeling.

But it didn't seem so.

The Beav was doing her weekly inventory in the freezers, singing along to "Groovin'" by The Young Rascals which she had playing on the CD player, reminding one and all of those carefree days of '67. Ida was still lazy. She was only cutting up fruit because The Beav was there making her do it. Gut came in from her morning snow removal duties bitching about her daughter who had apparently gotten back together with her carny-ex. Hopper breezed through, exclaiming how he loved the smell of bacon in the morning. Special Ed sat by himself in the corner, eating toast and drinking coffee and going over his reports. Horn didn't show at all for breakfast, but that wasn't unusual. He was probably out in the Heavy Shop or garage working on the Sno-Cats or the Sprytes. He never showed until lunch. Likewise for Locke. As winter advanced, Locke became more obsessive about his generators,

nursing them like an overprotective mother. Stokes, Hansen, and Koch, the FEMC crew, had been up all night running piping for the boilers so they were sleeping in. Gwen came in with Zoot, and Cryderman was too hung-over most mornings to do anything. Same went for Doc Flagg. And Eicke rarely left Atmospherics.

Everything seemed fine. Seemed normal.

Frye and Danny Shin came in together arguing about modern cinema. Frye was saying that a good movie had to have guns and explosions and Shin said that was typical American thinking. That European and Asian cinema were far superior because they pretty much steered clear of violence except where it was vital to the plot.

Frye just shook his head. "See? That's where you're wrong, Danny. You're a foreigner. You don't think like an American or you'd like explosions. Ain't that right, Gwen?" he said, taking his seat near the table where the Coven sat. "A good movie needs explosions and tits. Right?"

Zoot looked embarrassed. She looked to Gwen to see how she should feel about that. Gwen sipped her coffee. "Yeah, explosions, tits, and at least one hot shower screw scene. It's not a movie without some hot shower sex."

"See, Danny? See how fucked-up you are?" Frye said. "It's because you're a foreigner."

"But we're all foreigners down here," Zoot said.

"That's right, sweet thing, but Shin, he's a foreigner wherever he goes."

Shin sighed and toyed with his mustache. "Oh, I get it. Because my parents were Chinese that makes me a foreigner. Well, if I'm a foreigner, then you're a foreigner, Frye."

"Hell, no. I'm American. I ain't no foreigner."

"And what were your parents?"

"They were English. Both of 'em came out of Liverpool after the war. I went to Liverpool once, visited my cousin Bonnie. Me and her got pissing drunk for five days straight. That's what I like about people from Liverpool. When it comes to drinking, they don't fuck around. I respect that."

This sort of intolerant, ignorant behavior was classic Frye. He was the original blue collar hardcase.

When Coyle rolled out of bed that morning, untangling himself from Gwen, his guts had been knotted like a corset, but now, slowly, they were loosening up. Maybe Locke was nuts. Scratch that. He was nuts. But that didn't mean he was wrong.

Harvey came storming in as he did most mornings, red-faced and fuming, a small, husky, and very round dynamo. He made for Special Ed with his daily list of grievances. Today it was something special. He stood over by Special Ed with his hands on his hips, grinding his teeth. "Somebody stole my piss can," he said. "Somebody stole it and I want it back right goddamn now."

There were a few chuckles over that.

Piss cans were kept in the rooms for midnight relief so you didn't have to make that run to the latrine. Some people found them offensive and refused to use them, but sooner or later just about everyone got into the habit.

"Your can was missing when you woke up?" Special Ed said, taking it all very seriously as he did with the most ridiculous complaints. He even had his red Bic out, was ready to log this.

Harvey grunted. "No, there was a piss can there, but it wasn't *mine*."

"This is getting spooky," someone said. "A counterfeit piss can."

More laughter.

Special Ed remained composed.

This was dead serious business with possible international ramifications and you could tell that by the look on his face. Something like this needed to be logged. Special Ed was good at stuff like this. He'd been at Clime last winter, too, and Coyle remembered the investigatory zeal he'd practiced while trying to root out the infamous Mystery Smoker in the Showers and the heinous Midnight Coffee Cup Thief or how he'd settled that ugly dispute between the two GA's. GA #1 did not like GA #2 looking at her. But since this bugged the holy shit out of GA #1, GA #2 could not stop doing it. GA #1 was reduced to tears on several occasions and GA #2 simply said, "What? I was just looking at her. God." Since Special Ed could not catch GA #2 in the act despite his crime-fighting acumen, GA #1 took matters into her own hands and videotaped GA #2 staring at her. This was the smoking gun, GA

#1 decided. But GA #2 maintained that just because she was looking into the camera while being filmed—and smiling brightly—this did not mean she stared at GA #1 when the video was not rolling. Special Ed put a restraining order on GA #2. She was not allowed to look at GA #1 or even talk to her.

That was classic Special Ed.

He had a natural talent for the absurd.

Of course, now and again a crime so villainous in nature would occur that it would simply elude even him. Such was the case with the infamous Fucko the Clown last winter. Fucko was stealing women's underwear. Picking the locks to their doors and snatching panties off into thin air, leaving nothing but a pornographic playing card in his wake.

Special Ed was stumped.

To this day, like Jack the Ripper, the identity of Fucko the Clown remained a controversial mystery . . . though it did have a happy ending. At the end of winter, a lovely collage of women's panties was found in the Community Room touched off by a few of Gwen's leopard thongs. Gut's extremely large "granny underwear" were the centerpiece of this decorative and artistic display. But as Frye had said, "her drawers were so big you could've parachuted safely with them from 20,000 feet."

So it was here in the ludicrous bosom of Antarctic camp life that Special Ed finally shined bright. When he wasn't investigating grievances, he made a lot of postings. Most of them were authorized postings telling the crew not to make *un*authorized postings.

"Hey," Gwen said, "you can use my piss can, Harv. Long as you empty it first."

"Ha, ha, ha. Everybody's a joker." Harvey's face was getting redder now. "I know my piss pot. I don't trust you people so I mark all my stuff with a special sign so I know. One of you went in my room and swiped it."

"Your special sign?" Gwen said.

"No! My goddamn pisspot! You know damn well what I mean!" He looked at everyone suspiciously, his face so red that his thinning gray hair was whiter than the frost on the windows. "Now I want it back. Whoever

took it puts it outside my door today, I won't ask any questions. But I want that piss can back!"

Frye just lost it. "Hey, you people!" he called out. "This is serious stuff now! Harv wants that fucking piss can back and he means business! He's not pissing until he gets it back!"

"Why don't you shut up, Frye!" Harvey said.

Frye blew him a kiss.

Harvey couldn't take it anymore. He stormed out of the Community Room vowing vengeance on the guilty party. "They wanna keep pushing me?" he said. "Let 'em push me! But they're gonna find out that I push back!"

That's the way it was at all the stations.

Petty bullshit and foolish gripes and infantile whining all lorded over by a half-ass Mickey Mouse bureaucratic system that encouraged tattling and finger-pointing and would fully investigate the most ridiculous complaint instead of telling the whiners to shut up and get back to work.

Coyle had seen it plenty.

They had an extremely belligerent and homophobic heavy equipment operator at Pole Station one year. He hated gays and openly called for their extermination. A guy like that was asking for it. Somebody painted flowers on his favorite shovel—pansies, of course—and a full-scale investigation ensued. But that only encouraged more of the same. Flowery love letters were slid under his door with openly homosexual romantic poems addressed to him. Then somebody hacked into the station manager's account and sent a pornographic email to the homophobe. But it all reached a crisis point when Frye got sick of the homophobe's whining and called him, "a fucking faggot."

The HR guy had to talk to Frye about anger management issues and put that in his file. Frye said that was fine, because the homophobe was "nothing but a goddamn fairy anyway."

Coyle was relieved to see that the crew at Clime was still a bunch of whackos. The Callisto thing and the disappearance of Cassie Malone had not disrupted that. Things seemed okay.

Soon enough everyone was eating and joking and bickering like usual. The food disappeared fast and Coyle got his usual round of compliments. Things were absolutely normal. Nobody mentioned any of the weird things going on, at least that Coyle was able to pick up on. Mount Hobb, Callisto, the possible situation at NOAA Polaris, and even Cassie herself were not mentioned. And was that good or bad? He couldn't be sure. He would have liked it better if these things were discussed instead of hidden away like dirty family secrets.

But he was no psychologist. What did he know?

From what he was able to ascertain, everything was completely normal. Relationships were the same. Plenty of off-color jokes and jibes and funny stories about other years. Just breakfast conversation: light and airy. No deep discussions. Things seemed ordinary at Polar Clime.

He allowed himself to sigh.

But what he didn't know was that this was simply the calm before the storm.

9

NOAA FIELD STATION POLARIS
—EN ROUTE, MARCH 8

JUST AS HE FIGURED, Coyle was chosen for the SAR team. Horn and Gwen came along as did Dr. Flagg. The NSF waited several days before launching a SAR, but in the end they had to.

Though morning, it was pitch black, and not the blackness of the real, civilized world, but the polar blackness that was infinitely blacker than any night you could imagine until you saw it firsthand. Flakes of snow and crystals of ice spun in the headlights in a swirling thick vortex, blowing and drifting and making the cab of the Spryte shake. They glanced off the windshield as the wipers frantically pumped to clear them. Beyond the headlights it was a white waste, barren and hostile.

Gwen was sitting in the front seat, between Horn who was driving and Coyle who was simply bored. She seemed to be enjoying herself. "This is fun, isn't it?" she said. "Two men squeezing me from either side. Mama likes that."

"Only you could get turned on out here," Coyle told her.

"It's the desolation, Nicky. Raw, violent nature. Gets my blood pumping." Though there was plenty of room for three in the seat, she spread out her legs in her red wind pants so that her knees touched those of her companions. "I got an idea. You boys can be the bread and I'll be the meat. We'll make a nice Gwen sandwich. How does that sound?"

Coyle shrugged. "Well, I am pretty hungry."

Horn just ignored her as he always did. To him, most people were something you ignored because rarely did anything they say warrant your undivided attention. He cursed under his breath, finally said, "Real sweet morning for a drive, Nicky. I'm loving it."

"What'd you expect?" Coyle said.

"Oh, quit your whining, Horn," Gwen said. "You didn't have to come. You volunteered for chrissake."

He just grunted, guiding the Spryte over the ice and away from Polar Clime and the mountains and out onto the polar plateau itself. Ordinary compasses were pretty much useless on the Ice, but the Spryte had a GPS system that would guide them right to the door of NOAA Polaris.

Horn said, "I volunteered, Gwen, because I wanted to make sure Nicky made it there in one piece. I figured it was better than letting some bimbo drive him. You know, like you for instance."

"Did he just insult me, Nicky?" Gwen said, enjoying it. Horn had pretty much ignored her since the season began. Finally, she had gotten a rise out of him.

"No, he didn't insult you. That was a compliment."

Gwen threw her hair over her shoulder. "I thought so. Now admit it, Horn, you weren't worried about Nicky. You were worried about me. You've been hot for me from day one."

In the backseat, Flagg ignored them, listening to his notes over a headset.

The cab jerked as they passed over a mound of hardpack. Horn kept peering through the windshield.

"I would go after you, Gwen," he said finally, "but unfortunately I liken women in general to black widow spiders and I have no intention of having you suck me dry."

"A good sucking never hurt anyone," she said. "You should try it sometime."

"I have, dear, I have. I was married once. And I still have the scars from her fangs on my neck. Not to mention other parts."

Coyle was laughing under his breath. What a couple. Gwen the nympho and Horn the confirmed nihilist. He wasn't hearing wedding bells in the near future.

Horn said, "Let me put it this way, Gwen. You can play the hot-to-trot little camp slut all you want, but I know women. I know how they are. They're always after something and it rarely comes without baggage. Women play headgames. Women are on power trips. Sex to them is a way of

controlling men, a way of owning them. You claim you want sex without strings, but I don't buy that. You want strings to pull and men to manipulate. No thanks, I've already been through all that. Nobody owns me and nobody pulls my strings. Sex is just a power game that leads to relationships and relationships are just a way of selling your soul and getting shit in return."

Either Gwen didn't realize she was being insulted and her gender in general or maybe she just didn't care. "I'm not talking about relationships, Horn. I'm talking about fucking."

Coyle lost it, starting laughing his ass off.

Horn sighed. "Gwen, you're a UT, right? A Utilities Technician?"

"Yeah. What of it?"

"Well, you're down here to fix things. Washers and humidifiers and furnaces?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I'm not a utility that you can fix. I'm broken and bitter and hateful. Better to stick with your tool belt."

She smiled and cast him a salacious look. "Oh, mama's very good with tools. You should come and see sometime."

"Especially if they have batteries," Coyle said.

"Batteries? Mama don't use no batteries, boys, she plugs right into direct current."

"Of course. Why not? Every time the lights dim, she's going at it, Nicky."

"Oh, just sometimes," Gwen said. "Ask Nicky . . . mama's given him a few presentations he won't forget."

Gwen played hard at being a nympho and she did it, Coyle figured, to have the exact opposite reaction that you would think: to scare away men. It could be a hard life for an attractive woman at the stations, so she resolved this by coming on too strong and scaring men away. Oh, it got her into trouble from time to time and especially when the men were drunk and discovered she was just a tease, but, surprisingly, it worked more often than not. Simple child psychology.

And Horn?

Horn was not so easy to explain.

Other than the fact that he was a damn good mechanic, little could be said. He did not trust people. He was nihilistic by nature, cynical, angry. Coyle knew him about as good as anyone, had spent more than a few winters and summers with him. The thing about Horn you wanted to remember was that he fit in no box.

One summer at McMurdo, Horn openly confessed that he had lost his faith. So, since it was gone, he decided he needed to create his own religion. If some half-assed science fiction writer like L. Ron Hubbard could make up something as inherently ridiculous as Scientology, Horn claimed, then why couldn't he start his own religion, too? He figured that most religious people were religious because down deep they were atheists trying to overcompensate for their pessimistic world-views. So it only stood to reason that somebody with absolutely no faith should start a religion of his or her own.

Horn thought long and hard about it and came up with something called Utilitology.

In Utilitology, only inanimate office utilities such as typewriters, file cabinets, and fax machines could be worshipped. And this only within the cubicles of office parks. His motto was: WHEN ALL ELSE HAS FAILED—UTILITOLOGY. Of course, office parks and cubicles were difficult to come by in Antarctica, so he had to broaden the scope of his new religion. That's when he decided that Richard Byrd, the noted Antarctic explorer, was to be the patron saint of Utilitology and that somewhere beneath the vast wastes of the South Pole there was a relict population of Penguini, the Chosen Ones, who were brought about by Ernie Shackleton's men mating with Emperor Penguins.

That's how nuts Horn was.

Last year at Clime, Coyle and Horn had decided to write a novel together called *Asshole of the Civilized World: A Journal of Polar Sodomy.* It concerned a famous female American Indian Antarctic explorer called Pokatwatalot who was abducted by a violent band of inbred criminal penguins, viciously raped and forced into prostitution in polar brothels. After a series of unpleasant interludes amongst the smarmy penguin

underworld, she was rescued by a dashing—and well-hung—NSF administrator named Hard Tack.

All of which, just goes to show what bored and bitter minds will resort to and just how far around the bend Horn's thinking was.

"That was a good supper you made last night, Nicky. I can always tell when you cook compared to Ida or The Beav."

"Nicky is famous for his beef stroganoff," Gwen said.

Coyle laughed. "That's right. And don't you forget it."

Gwen pushed up against him. "Mama likes beef, Nicky, especially yours." She winked at him. "Only yours."

He gave her knee a squeeze and she grabbed his hand and moved it up to her thigh.

"Enough already," Horn said. "Jesus Christ, this is serious business. Those people might be dead."

"That's right," Flagg said from the back. "Let's act like adults here, shall we?"

"You worry too much, Doc," Gwen said.

"I think we all have a damn good reason to worry."

Gwen shook her head. "It's not my way. Too much shit to worry about in life without worrying about things that haven't even come to pass."

Coyle smiled. Gwen's practicality was priceless.

They had been traveling well over an hour by that point. It was about a ninety minute drive to NOAA Polaris. It was a dangerous jaunt. Something went wrong and so much for one mechanic, one UT, one doctor, and one cook . . . and part-time camp therapist. The four of them were bundled in their ECWs, but they'd unzipped their parkas because with the heater blasting it was a balmy 68 degrees in the cab. But all it took was a simple breakdown to turn a little drive into a fight for survival. It was thirty below outside and the wind was pushing it down to fifty. Exposed in that kind of weather, you wouldn't make it more than a few hours at best, even with a heated polar jumpsuit on.

"We should be getting close," Flagg said.

In the Spryte's headlights, there was just an endless expanse of snow compacted by the ages, ancient blue ice showing through from time to time.

Horn picked up the radio mic, cleared his throat. "Polaris-One, Polaris-One, this is Spryte Two," he said, using the call name/number of the Spryte. It was "Two" simply because there were two Sprytes at Clime, three Sno-Cats etc. "Polaris . . . do you copy? This is Spryte Two from Polar Clime en route to your destination. We have an ETA of ten minutes. Do you copy that?"

There was nothing but droning static over the speaker.

Horn sighed. "Polaris-One, this is Spryte Two. Do you copy? Repeat: Do you copy, Polaris?"

More static.

Nobody paid much attention.

Horn just shook his head. "Technology, the great white god itself has failed once again."

"Oh, give it to me," Gwen said, but she didn't touch the mic.

"Here," Horn said, offering it to her.

"I never said I wanted the microphone." She winked at Coyle. "I just said, *give it to me*."

Coyle laughed again. "Gwen, Gwen, Gwen. You really have to knock that shit off, girl. You carry on like that and you're gonna get all the wrong attention. You'll end up raped and stuffed in a snowdrift."

"Promises, promises." She snatched the mic from Horn. "Polaris-One? This is Spryte Two en route from Polar Clime. Do you read me? Do you read me?" She shook the mic. "We're on our way. We got some hot stuff on the menu. Left-over beef stroganoff or a blowjob, whichever you want first."

Coyle took the mic from her. "Gwen, Jesus Christ. Hopper'll have a fit if he heard that." He checked the radio. It seemed to be working. The GPS told him they were only minutes away. If it had been light out, they could have seen it. "Polaris-One? Polaris-One? Come on, boys, rise and shine. This is Spryte Two out of Polar Clime. Do you copy? Do you copy?"

More static. Dead air and nothing but dead air.

Nobody was surprised, of course. There had been dead air and nothing but dead air from NOAA Polaris in days. There had been a hope . . . albeit a small one . . . that maybe they were having some sort of transmission problems and that as the Spryte got within range, contact would be established.

No such luck.

Outside the cab, the bouncing lights of the Spryte showed them the flat white desolation of the polar plateau blown by surface drift and icy crystals, an occasional howling snow devil. Other than an occasional field of wind-sculpted sastrugi that looked like a rippling, frozen ocean, the landscape was an immense monotonous expanse of bleak nothingness.

"We should see it within five minutes," Horn said.

Radio communications had a way of going toes up on the Ice . . . yet, Coyle was beginning to get a light fluttery feeling in his stomach. The sort of feeling you got in your guts as your bucket seat on the double Ferris wheel swung up and around the high arc and you had that awful sensation of weightlessness and relentless descent. Gwen had pressed up closer to him. In the dimness of the cab, her eyes looked very bright and wet.

She was no longer making jokes.

Humor, hope, and good cheer had no place out here.

The cabin altimeter said they were some 11,000 feet above sea level now which meant they were at the highest point of the Atlantis Dome and very close to Polaris Lab.

"There," Gwen said. "There it is."

Everyone studied what the headlights showed them: the gleaming ice; the flagged perimeters of remote pathways; the blowing snow and spinning ice crystals; the darkness as the beams slit it open, the slinking shadows that looked like they moved and pulled back of their own accord.

The wind was blowing harder now, gusting up to thirty knots and throwing snow at the Spryte with a vengeance. It rocked on its caterpillar treads as the conflicting gales tore at it, trying to peel it free of the ice. This was the result of the awesome katabatic winds which came rolling down from the highlands of the Transantarctics, gathering speed and density from

downsloping gravitational forces and became a force to be reckoned with out on the plateau itself.

"There she blows," Horn said under his breath.

He turned on the spotlights atop the cab and night turned to day . . . or nearly.

The ice road had ended, opening up into a wide clearing and there was NOAA Field Lab Polaris: a self-contained prefab polar habitat that looked like a long orange box. It had been brought out here during the summer by a Sikorsky Skycrane helicopter in one piece and then bolted to the ice. Other than an attendant generator shed and a few modular plastic storage shacks, there was nothing else.

The habitat was dark.

"Looks pretty quiet out there," Gwen said and there was something just under her words like a building panic.

Horn just sat there, his face unreadable as always. "Maybe they went for a walk."

"What do you think, Nicky?"

He studied the snow-drifted habitat with a wary eye, feeling a sense of desolation that he did not like. "If they went for a walk," he said, "I just hope it's not the same kind of walk everyone at Mount Hobb took that night."

10

POLAR CLIME STATION

SLIM WAS IN A box and there was no key.

He was trapped in the bowels of Antarctica and it really didn't matter if he was going crazy, because there was absolutely no way out. If he went raving they'd just shoot him with sedatives and restrain him until spring Winfly. That was it. He was here and April was back home in Illinois with Rachel and they both needed him and there was nothing he could do about it.

He felt useless.

He felt like a failure as a man. As a husband and a father.

He jumped up off his bed and kicked the wall. "FUCKING BULLSHIT, MAN! THIS IS FUCKING BULLSHIT!"

He paced back and forth, thinking and trying not to think, his mind filled with horrors that were, that might be, that were yet to come. The world was losing its collective mind and his family was caught up in it and all he could do was wait and wait and wait. Take sleeping pills and have crazy dreams, fight off the goddamn headaches that came and went with unsettling regularity, and think about the shit that Locke had told him. Dead cities and aliens. Megaliths that were machines or networks. The human race being some kind of fucking crop the aliens had seeded and were now preparing to harvest.

Falling to his knees on the cold floor, he thought, *I don't believe in that shit. I don't care what kind of dreams I'm having or what kind April and Rachel are having . . . I don't believe in that shit!*

And, dear God, if only he really didn't.

But he did.

The dreams, what was going on down here and back in the world . . . it was all part of something big. Something immense. Something so black and ugly and vile that it made him physically ill to contemplate its awful ramifications.

He climbed to his feet and kicked his little desk, scattered the papers that fell off and dropped on top of them, shredding them and balling them up. Drawings and half-ass attempts at poetry that had been written to explain what was in his mind, that evil influence he'd felt ever since he saw that thing under the tarp.

He hated all of it.

He kept tearing up the papers until he found his battered notebook. The one he wrote his song lyrics in. Because that's what he wanted to do. He wanted to write songs and do album cover design and body art. But those were pipedreams and he had a wife and a kid and, goddammit, he had to pay the bills. That's why he had come down to Antarctica in the first place.

Kneeling there, Slim wept as he paged through his notebook and saw all the lyrics he'd scribbled there back when the world was good and not some twisted nightmare. Tears rolled down his cheeks as he saw the lyrics of a song he'd written with Locke not two weeks ago. He tore that page out and tossed it. It was like something from another life when he actually knew how to have a good time. It seemed like ages ago. Like something he'd read in a book or saw on TV: plastic, synthetic, unreal.

Life was not like that anymore.

It was a dark matter now written by a dark hand on yellowed vellum that was crumbling away with the dominion of the ages. And knowing this, Slim put his face in his hands and cried. Cried tears of blood for his soul was forever wounded and gored, slit open and laid bare by the cruel knife of antiquity.

And a voice in his head that was stark and flat told him: *Even your gods and your religion and the very architecture of your civilization and society were but seeds planted by the Old Ones. Your race never truly had free will or choice, just a vague semblance of the same. You were puppets from the moment your ancestors crawled from the slime of cosmic generation. Every step plotted, every development foreseen. Biologically, mentally, and psychically . . . it was all*

directed and controlled to bring the race to where it stands now . . . on the very threshold of the ages, where its true nature and true purpose will be revealed.

It's all been a terrible lie.

You never really existed.

You were appendages of something ancient and dominating that has returned now to take possession of what was rightly theirs in the first place.

That voice was not his own, yet it was. The voice of the very race itself that was locked up in every man, woman, and child on the planet. It was incapable of lying. It saw the truth and reported it thusly.

Slim began to cry harder.

Cry like he hadn't since he was a kid and had gotten the belt for staying out three hours past curfew and showed up on his parent's doorstep in a police car. The tears kept coming and coming and coming and–

"Slim."

He jumped, looked around.

He was alone and he knew it. The door was locked. Nobody could have come in. But that voice . . . it had sounded like April's voice, clear and shining and perfect like it had been spoken just behind him.

He whirled around, looking, looking. He ran to the door and opened it. There was no one in the corridor. He shut the door, locked it, leaned his back against it, his heart pounding in his chest.

"Slimmm."

No, not April's voice at all.

Something else.

A wavering, eerie buzzing sound like a grasshopper or a beetle had been pronouncing his name. It made him go hot and cold and then his head spun with dizziness and he slid to the floor, panting. And that's when he saw his breath frosting from his mouth. The air had dropped fifty or sixty degrees in a matter of moments. It was unbearably cold suddenly and already his extremities were feeling numb.

"Generators are out," he said, but knew it was not true.

And what happened next proved it.

None of this was station-wide, this was personal, this was directed at him and he knew *who* and *what* was doing the directing. The air was absolutely glacial. So cold it was hard to breathe. His fingers were so numb he couldn't even make a fist. He heard a pounding in the walls and the floor beneath him began to vibrate madly and with such force that he began to move around, planing over it and he couldn't stop. There was a sudden violent stink like ozone that was so sharp and pervasive he nearly vomited.

And then–

A shrill droning sound filled the room with a deafening pitch. It sounded like nothing but the frenzied flapping of wings, huge and leathery wings that belonged to *them* that were now calling their children home, summoning their stock for the final, ultimate grim harvest.

The wings grew louder and louder.

There were knocking sounds in the walls and all those drawings of the aliens and that dead city he had dreamed of were fluttering as if some great, frigid wind were ripping through the room. One by one, they broke free of their tacks and tape and flew in a wild spinning torrent, a tornado of papers that spun and spun like a dust-devil.

Slim was thrown flat to the floor, but gradually the incredible suction of that whirlwind canceled out his own gravity and he was lifted bodily into the air, held aloft screaming in that vortex of papers and wind and awful gagging odors like formalin and ammonia that burned his throat and squeezed his eyes shut with a flow of tears.

They were *coming*.

He could feel them approaching.

Coming to take possession of him.

His papers and drawings flew in a mad cyclone and on the wall, written in bleeding red letters was something he knew he had never written, but perhaps dreamed:

GOD WILL NOT BE THE ONE THAT CALLS OF THEE

FOR THEE IS THRICE NAMED BY THE DIVELLS OF OLD

GATHER IN THEIR NAME AND GIVE UNTO THEM THAT WHICH IS THEIRS

AND THEIRS ALONE

Slim screamed his throat raw, but he knew his voice was never heard for he was trapped in stasis, in some black and malevolent vacuum that was not of this reality or the next but a multidimensional hell somewhere in-between that the Old Ones could call up with but a single, searing thought.

His mind was no longer his own.

They had now unlocked the dire controls they had implanted in it and it all rose up and swallowed him alive, squeezed the ancestral memories from his deepest, most secret and primal places—

—he saw the ancient city, rising and machined and cold, a product of the utilitarian hive mind that had designed and erected it. The city, the city, the city. This was where the winged devils took them, his people, his race, through the dark roll of ages... when men were not men but tree-dwelling animals and then apelike things and then proto-humans and finally the time of the reaping... the changing and modifying . . . the cutting and draining and dissecting... beasts to men... minds conscious and vitalized and engineered into great thinking, reasoning brains that were like their own . . . the swarm that gathered and reaped . . . the ancient swarm . . . the communal hive . . . the Wild Hunt–

The air was filled with a fierce crackling and a flickering charge of energy.

A headache rose up, throbbing in Slim's skull and blotting out everything, who he was and who he *thought* he was. And he saw the wall of his room which faced the darkened compound suddenly glow white-hot and lose all physical reality.

Something was coming through it.

Passing right through like smoke through a screen. Something like he had seen under that tarp, but viscidly alive and vital and luminous.

The winged devil.

The imprint of which was burned onto the template of every human mind, the nucleus of diabolic horror from the race's infancy which would later be re-channeled into tales of winged demons and devils and flying night-haunts of every description. This was the inspiration, the most

terrifying thing the race had ever known: the image of its god, its master, its maker and enslaver–

—that great barrel-shaped oblong body with the thick tentacles at its base that it walked upon, the huge membranous wings flaring out, the reaching and coiling tendrils that branched into sticklike feelers. And worse, dear God, worse... those erect stalks atop its head each set with a staring, burning eye like a bleeding ruby–

Dear Christ, the thousand eyes.

The million eyes.

The eyes that knew and owned, that made and enslaved, sowed and reaped and harvested.

The cosmic lords of the helix, the spiral of life here and on a thousand far-flung worlds.

And this was what it was like to finally look God in the face.

11

EMPEROR ICE CAVE,
BEARDMORE GLACIER

GODDAMN WARREN.

Guy would play X-Box twenty-four/seven if you let him.

Biggs wasn't big on video games, thought it was all kid's stuff, shit for nerds who didn't have a real life. Fantasy roll-playing and all that. Pretend you were some hardcase with lots of guns blowing away monsters and bad guys. Silly. But he was so bored, he wished he'd picked up on it. He could use the diversion. You could only read so many skin magazines and paperback westerns.

The Hypertat had an entire DVD library on hard-drive if you were so inclined, but Biggs wasn't. Everything that came out of Hollywood these days seemed to have the same recycled plot. Kind of stuff that appealed to guys like Warren or your average fourteen-year old boy. Comic book shit. Wizards and dragons, giant robots, high-tech superheroes going after terrorists. The good guys got beat up bad and then came swooping in at the end and kicked ass and made the world safe and everybody lived happily ever after. Same old, same old.

Biggs tried to read.

Then he tried to surf the web.

Lastly, he listened for bored souls out of the other stations.

Nothing and nothing.

He got up and paced around, thought about sampling some of the Hypertat's endless frozen cuisine. No. Nothing sounded good. He couldn't seem to sit still. Had the craziest feeling that he was waiting for something, something big that was about to happen. Weird. He was agitated inside, restless, nerves on edge. Felt like a kid waiting to open presents or one who

was in trouble waiting for his old man to get home and give him the business.

He paced.

He clenched and unclenched his hands.

Finally, Warren took off his headphones. “You’re getting on my nerves, man,” he said.

“Yeah? Sorry. Restless or something.”

“Why don’t you take a walk? Go see what’s cooking below. I’ll watch the radio.”

“Yeah . . . no, no. I’m not going out there.”

He went to the window and scraped the frost off it. Bitter cold out there. There were security lights set out at the perimeter of the Hypertats so you could find your way around. More lights marked the passage beyond that led deeper and deeper into the cave. The passage slowly canted down at a forty-five degree angle into the belly of the glacier until it reached the lower level some 300 feet below, an immense ice cavern. That was where Dryden, Stone, Kenneger, and the others worked, exploring the network of ice caverns, drifts, and crevasses, doing the business of glaciology, hydrology, and microbiology.

Biggs could have went down there, hung around in the Polar Haven they warmed up in and crunched their numbers. Maybe stood around and watched them taking cores. But he would have been in the way and not being scientifically-minded, not much of anything they said made any sense to him.

Dryden’s boys would just ignore him.

They’d ramble on about paleoclimatology studies and air-hydrate formation, climatic indicators and ice biogenics. Start tossing around the stats of isotopic, glaciochemical, and stratigraphic properties of bore holes and Eocene permafrost, discuss the joys of subglacial topography and cosmogenic isotopes. They’d get real excited about it, passionate even, start arguing and throwing their hands around like they were debating Sunday’s game.

No thanks, I can be bored spitless just fine on my own.

There was always Reese and Paxton, Dryden's survey engineering team who were mapping out the crevasses and ice drifts for him, but they weren't much better. Kind of clannish, stuck-up.

Biggs kept staring out the window into the depths of the Emperor.

It was one of the largest ice caves ever discovered and the beakers were all worked up about it. He supposed it *was* impressive. The glow of the security lights out there were absorbed by the ancient ice, making it appear almost luminescent. The walls were set with ridges, flows, and troughs like frozen waves. The ceiling far above hung by literally thousands of icicles, some of them so big they looked like Medieval lances. And all of it that shimmering incandescent blue that practically took your breath away.

Beautiful, really.

Breathtaking.

And Biggs would have thought so, too, had he not been trapped down here in this fucking Hypertat in the funnel of the Emperor itself on the dirty backside of the Beardmore.

God, no escape. No nothing.

He stepped away from the window, feeling the throb of a headache in the back of his skull. His nerves were jangling. His hands trembling. His belly was all light and fluttery, felt like he was about to have fucking kittens.

What the hell was going on?

What was this about–

The radio pinged. Incoming.

Biggs darted over there, hoping maybe it was one of the boys calling from McMurdo or Icefall Station, wanting to hook up for internet poker or something. He slid the headset on, hopeful.

No dice. Just Dryden calling from the Polar Haven below.

"Emperor One, this is Emperor Two calling."

Dryden had come up with that. Emperor One was the upper team in the Hypertat; Emperor Two was Dryden's lower team in the Polar Haven. Cute.

"Emperor One here, Doc. I'm reading you."

"Take a message," Dryden said, sounding practically breathless. "This goes out to NSF McMurdo, Crary Lab. Dr. Galen. Got that?"

"Got it," Biggs said, scratching it all down on his notepad. "Whenever you're ready."

Dryden paused a minute, like maybe he was trying to catch his breath below. And above, Biggs felt that sense of pending excitement and apprehension take full flower inside him. He didn't know what was coming, but he had a feeling it was important.

"Okay," Dryden said. "Here it is: Perfect specimen located as suspected in ice. Completely intact. Thawing may prove difficult. Coring suggests age of 700,000 years. Repeat: intact specimen, Pleistocene ice. More details to follow. Dryden."

"Got it," Biggs told him.

"Read it back to me. It's important."

Biggs did, giving Dryden the sort of dry delivery he thrived upon. When he was done, he said, "Hell you find, Doc? What's down there."

"You'll see soon enough." He paused. "Send it, Biggs. I want it out right now."

"Okay . . . but I got to run it by Commander Beeman, Doc. He'll have my ass in a frying pan if I don't. He wants to know what's going out. Navy regs, sir."

On the other end Dryden fumed. "I don't give a shit want Beeman wants. And I give less of a shit what the fucking Navy wants. This is my project and I'll cut the orders. He has a problem with that, he can take it up with me personally."

"Okay, Doc. You're the boss."

"Damn right I am."

The connection was broken.

Biggs was grinning. Just sowing the seeds of trouble again, that's all he was doing. Anything to piss off Beeman and drive a wedge between him and the others. Maybe Warren had his video games, but Biggs had his own hobbies. Clearing his throat rather loudly, he called up McMurdo in a voice

that was loud and clear and one that was certain to rouse Beeman from his slumber. He told the guy at MacRelay to patch him through to Crary, priority one. Guy wanted to know what it was about and Biggs, just having too much fun now, told him it was a matter of national security.

The guy got him through fast.

Galen got on the horn and Biggs repeated the message. Three times. Galen sounded pretty excited like maybe he'd just learned that Megan Fox was keeping his bed warm for him. But that's the way it was with beakers. They got off on the craziest shit.

No sooner had Biggs finished his transmission when he felt the cool, efficient shadow of Lieutenant-Commander Beeman fall over him. "What was that all about, mister? Who gave you authorization to send a priority one message without my approval?"

Biggs spun around in his swivel chair. "Dr. Dryden, Chief. That's who."

"Goddammit, Biggs! How many times do we have to go over this?" Beeman wanted to know. "You don't send anything out without approval! *My* approval, you damn idiot!"

"Yes sir, Lieutenant-Commander Beeman, sir!" Biggs said, snapping to attention. "I told Dr. Dryden that . . . but, well, Chief, he just don't have any respect for your authority. Personally, sir, I think he thinks you're a flunky. And a really fucking stupid one at that."

Warren wasn't playing video games now.

This was better.

Beeman was really something to see. Guy was like a kaleidoscope, going a dozen different shades of scarlet and purple. He had more colors in his face than a bag of Skittles. Cords snapped tight in his throat. Veins pulsed at his temples. His ears got so red they looked like they might start on fire. Biggs stepped back a bit because he thought the guy's bulging eyes were going to pop out of his head and hurt someone.

"YOU LISTEN TO ME, YOU SMART-ASSED, LAZY, INCOMPETENT SHIT!" Beeman shouted. "I'VE HAD ENOUGH OF YOUR CRAP! I'M IN CHARGE HERE AND YOU BETTER START TOEING THE FUCKING

LINE OR SO HELP ME I'LL BREAK YOU! NOTHING GOES OUT WITHOUT MY SAY-SO, UNDERSTAND?"

"Yes sir! I understand just fine, sir!" Biggs said, giving him another limp-wristed salute. "But the problem here, big boss man, is that Dr. Dryden is in charge of this project and I do what *he* says! And Dryden told me quite specifically that he doesn't give a shit what you want, even less of one for what the fucking Navy wants! I have nothing but admiration and respect for you, sir, but I'm just following orders! *Sir!*"

That was it. That broke it.

Beeman charged in before he could even hope of controlling himself. He charged in and shoved Biggs with everything he had, putting him right down on his ass.

And Biggs thought: *That's it, you stupid jarhead! Now you've done it! Now you've pissed all over your efficient little record! I'm down and I'll stay down because, oh boy, you hurt me!*

"Oh! My fucking arm!" he whined, putting on the show. "I think you might have broken it, sir! I'll have to report this to the NSF. I'm pretty sure physical violence is in complete violation of NSF regulations." He looked over at Warren who couldn't seem to remember how to close his mouth. "You saw it, didn't you, Warren? You witnessed the assault?"

"Yeah . . . I mean, I guess I did."

Beeman looked ready to take it up another notch and break both Biggs's arms. But he controlled himself this time. "You do that. You report it. And while you're at it, you just remember that you're stuck with me until spring and I've got ways of making it one long, ugly winter for you."

Biggs smiled at him. "I'll make a note of it, Big Chief. Yes sir, I will. I'm stuck with you until spring and you have ways of making it one long, ugly winter for me. Yes sir, threat duly noted and logged, El Kahuna."

Beeman threw on his ECWs before his temper got the best of him and rapidly went out the door into the cold. When it was slammed shut, Biggs was still smiling.

"You just can't quit, can you?" Warren said.

“I won’t quit until that motherfucker has a stroke. Fucking Navy. Fucking push-button jarheads.”

There was silence for a time as Biggs started thinking about the message he had sent and what it might mean. Something about it all made that anxiety in him rise like boiling milk. His palms were sweating and he almost felt sick to his stomach. That headache began to pound again in his skull.

“Wonder what they found down there,” Warren said. “700,000 years old. Hell could it be?”

“Doc said we’d see soon enough.”

Warren tried to smile but completely missed the mark. “Maybe that’s what I’m afraid of.”

“I got something better to be afraid of,” Biggs said, his voice oddly hollow. “Dryden wants to thaw it out . . .”

12

NOAA FIELD CAMP POLARIS,
ATLANTIS ICE DOME

IT LOOKED LIKE THE inside of the habitat had been painted red.

They all knew it was blood, of course, because it could not be anything else. It was splashed over the floor in an ice puddle, sprayed up the walls in frozen runnels and inkblots, and even hanging from the ceiling in cherry-red icicles.

When they came into the habitat, Coyle in the lead, they saw it right away in the beams of their flashlights: not just death, not just murder, but absolute barbaric *slaughter.*

"Dear God, what happened here?" Flagg said.

The habitat was trashed. Desks flipped over, books scattered, papers flung about, dishes shattered. The airlock and outer door were wide open and snow had blown over the floor, drifting in the corners. Waters lines had burst in the cold, bleeding icicles from the ceiling.

Coyle kept looking around in disbelief. Lots of blood, but no bodies. What could that suggest?

"Horn?" he said. "You better go check that generator."

"Right." He didn't like the idea of going out there alone with what he was seeing, but he went.

While Flagg took video of the mess in the common room, Coyle and Gwen went down the corridor to check the other rooms.

"Look," Gwen said, indicating a bloody smear on the wall.

It looked like something wet with blood had been dragged along the wall. The trail ended at a doorway where it became a handprint . . . only distorted, the palm print weirdly angled, the fingers splayed out seven and eight inches.

“What kind of hand made that?” Gwen asked, her breath frosting out in a rolling cloud.

Coyle swallowed. “Must’ve . . . must’ve been smeared or something.”

The dorm rooms were untouched. No blood, no nothing. The beds looked slept in. They scanned their lights around and found a frozen bottle of water, a few magazines cast aside. Nothing else.

Storage lockers were untouched.

The lab was a different story.

Going in there, Coyle’s first sensory input was smell: a slightly acidic stench of fermentation that had no business being in the freezing air of the habitat. He breathed it in and it made something roll in his belly. Seconds later, he wasn’t sure he’d smelled it at all.

Everything was wrecked. Equipment tossed to the floor, glassware reduced to fragments, notebooks torn in half, laptops shattered against the walls and lying in twisted heaps. Ice cores had been broken into pieces.

And slime.

There was slime everywhere . . . or something like slime.

Something gluey and clear like the mucilaginous secretions of a plant. It was pooled on the worktables, webbing instruments together, ribbons of it oozing over the edge and dripping down in long strands like snot. A glistening smear of it ran right up the wall and dripped from the ceiling. All of it frozen hard as granite. Coyle could barely chip it with his ice-axe. It was clear and hard like acrylic.

Coyle felt a singular dryness in his throat like he’d just inhaled a mouth full of coal dust. His lips were stuck together, his tongue cleaved to the roof of his mouth. His belly felt like it was filled with looping black worms.

He stood there, flashing his light around, hunchbacked shadows crawling over the walls.

“Nicky . . . I keep smelling something bad,” Gwen said, her eyes huge and dark and wet. “But it can’t stink . . . not in this cold.”

“I smell it, too. There . . . then gone.”

He found himself transported back to 10th grade Biology with Mr. Slapp. He could almost smell the chalk and hear pencils scratching on papers, see autumn leaves blown up against the tall mullioned windows as Mr. Slapp nervously paced back and forth in front of the blackboard, making bad jokes about his thinning hair and jingling the change in his pockets. And what did it, what really brought that absurd memory back to him, was the smell in the room of chemicals and preservatives. In Slapp's classroom, there had been a wooden cabinet built into the wall that ran the length of one side of the room. It was filled with jars and glass vessels of pickled things—snakes and toads, fetal pigs and marine life, even what had looked like a shriveled and hairless monkey's head floating in pale serum—that were white and puckered, pressed up to the glass, staring and clutching and coiling, but perfectly dead.

And smelling the sharp, sickly sweet odor in the air brought it all back to him.

This lab, of course, was not like a tenth grade biology classroom. Everything was white and sterile or gleaming stainless steel. Instruments and chemicals were locked in metal cabinets, tables crowded with the remains of digital binocular microscopes, laptops, chromatographs, and protein analyzers. A maze of electronic equipment on carts. The lab had been well equipped for geology, glaciology, and microbiology studies.

Coyle stepped around tables and workstations, bumped into charts on the walls.

Gwen was pressed up close to him, her arm looped around his own. "This is . . . this is spooky, Nicky. Blood everywhere. No bodies. Everything wrecked like somebody went insane. What could have happened?"

He shook his head. "I just don't know."

"Mama thinks we should leave. Right now."

Horn came through the door, puffing out clouds of white air that did not dissipate in the polar chill but slowly rose towards the ceiling. "Generator's been dead for days. Fuel cells are ruptured, lines slit . . . it was done on purpose, Nicky. Somebody wanted to cool this place off in a hurry."

Sure, somebody, he thought as he looked around, trying to make some sense of the madness. *Whoever did this slaughtered the NOAA team, wrecked the generator, then selectively smashed-up certain rooms.*

Coyle squeezed his eyes shut, trying to find his center.

Flagg came down the corridor, holding his video camera in one hand. "It's all been documented for what good it will do us. I can't begin to . . . to understand something like this."

"Let's go," Coyle said, stepping past Horn and Flagg and taking off down the corridor as if he couldn't get out of the lab fast enough.

Flagg caught up with him. "We just can't leave this . . . like this."

"We have to. The NSF will do their own investigation in the spring. We'll leave it for them. Our job is to look for survivors, not play detective."

He led them back out into the cold and wind.

13

STANDING AT THE PERIMETER of a flagged pathway, Horn did not look too happy in the reflected glow of his flashlight. "Nicky, c'mon, what good is it going to do us to tromp around out there? We have a safety factor here, fuel-wise. I told you when we left we have about thirty minutes and then we've got to get out. We've already burned about twenty of those thirty minutes and I don't care for the idea of running out of gas out on the plateau."

"Quit your bitching," Gwen told him.

"Just a few minutes. Let's just do a quick canvas of the general area, see if we find anything," Coyle told him. "If we don't, Hopper's going to be asking why we didn't.

"Exactly," Flagg said. "We didn't come all this way to tuck our tails between our legs and run."

Horn sighed. "Shit. Okay. But I'm telling you right now I got me a real bad feeling about this."

"Noted," Coyle said.

The wind was fierce and steel-edged, kicking up wild, twisting snow-devils that engulfed them in spinning ice and drift. Several times as they followed the black flags down the pathway they had to pause, hold onto one another, as solid sheets of drift enveloped them, powdering them white, leaving them clawing snow from their goggles and gaiters and balaclavas.

They stayed together, only a few feet apart, fierce gusts trying to knock them down or throw them right over the guide ropes. But they pushed on, leaning into the wind.

Coyle wasn't sure why he insisted on this, but he felt it was important. In the final analysis he could have really cared less what Hopper wanted or didn't want; something else was driving him. Something beyond mere morbid curiosity.

Gwen held her light up. The beam was filled with spinning snowflakes. "Something up there . . . something ahead," she said through her balaclava.

Coyle saw it, ducking into a blast of drift and heading over there.

"Oh man," Horn said.

All lights were on their discovery. It was a body dressed in ECWs, covered now in a membrane of ice and snow. But not so much that they could not see that it had no head.

"No blood," Flagg said, kicking the snow around it. "This person wasn't killed here. Either they were blown here by the wind or–"

"Something dragged them here," Horn finished for him.

Flagg documented it with his camera.

They moved on until they found a rope tethered to one of the flagpoles. It was tied very tightly and white with snow. It had been there for some time.

Putting his back to the wind, Coyle said, "There must be something out there. I'm going after it."

"It's too dangerous to leave the pathway in a blow like this," Flagg pointed out. "You could get lost in ten feet."

"I'll follow the rope. Doc, you and Horn wait here." He got no argument on that. "C'mon, Gwen."

They ducked under the guide rope and followed the other rope off into the darkness. The weather was wild as it can only be out on the plateau where there is nothing to stop the wind. It screamed with demonic fury as they fought forward, holding mittened hands and not daring to let go of each other even for one second.

They didn't go far before they found something heaped with snow.

"It looks like a coffin," Gwen said, not attempting to hide the unease in her voice.

And it did as Coyle brushed the snow off it: a long silver coffin made of aluminum. Inside, there was a lot of snow as if the lid had been opened to the elements for some time before blowing shut. They stood there staring down into its shadowy confines for a few moments. Then Coyle, on his

knees on the hardpack, dug around in there, pushing aside snow and finding something clear and hard as ice.

"Look," he told Gwen, his light on it. "Slime. Like in the lab."

He wanted to tell himself that maybe this had been some kind of case for scientific equipment, but deep inside he knew better. Whatever had laid waste to the camp had come in this container. Something vicious. Something unbelievably deadly. And something that oozed copious amounts of slime.

They followed the rope maybe another twenty feet in the storm and there it ended, frayed and red.

"What the hell's going on, Nicky?" Gwen said, almost frantic with the need for an explanation.

So he told her quickly what he thought. "I know it sounds crazy, but if you've got something better, I'm listening."

The drift wind lightened for a moment and with their lights they could see things just ahead mounded in snow. They went over there, knowing they were taking big chances by straying away from the rope. What they found was a hand torn off at the wrist. It still had a wool mitten on it. And not ten feet away . . . another body.

"Oh God," Gwen said.

It was nearly buried in snow. It was a man and he had been thoroughly gutted, leaving a hollow trough from throat to crotch that was half-filled with snow. One arm was extended upwards, hand reaching towards the sky, his face a gray, shriveled screaming mask of horror.

He had died violently and in agony.

Coyle took Gwen by the hand, found the rope and followed it back towards the flagged pathway. The wind was screaming and he kept imagining that he heard something like a female voice buried in it, shrill and cackling and absolutely deranged.

"About time," Horn said when they showed.

"Anything?" Flagg asked as they started back along the pathway.

"Another body," Coyle told him. "All fucking torn apart."

He and Gwen led on, Horn and Flagg just behind them. The wind was at their backs now and it made the going easier as it pushed them along. But still the drift blew and whipped, blinding them and dumping snow over them.

They had sighted the lights of the idling Spryte when a gust that was practically cyclonic punched into them with incredible force, knocking Coyle to the ice and tossing Gwen right on top of him. Horn went sliding across the snowpack.

As Coyle hit the ice, he was seized by a manic, irrational terror because he was not so certain it *was* the wind. As it blasted into them it shrieked with a sound that was like some deafening unearthly squealing.

He pulled himself up and helped Gwen to her feet, shining his light in all directions. The storm raged, drift flying like buzzing hornets in his flashlight beam. He thought for one crazy, devastating moment that slid icicles into his stomach that he saw something . . . something large and distorted, hunched-over pulling off into the blizzarding darkness.

"Where's Flagg?" Gwen said, panic in her voice. "Where the hell is Flagg?"

Horn and Coyle looked around frantically.

He was nowhere to be scene.

Then Horn said, "Oh shit . . ."

Beyond the guide ropes there was a vibrant red spray in the snow that led off as far as their lights would reach and as they took that in, each one shivering with escalating dread, they heard a sound which was not the wind: a hysterical, agonized screaming in the distance.

Flagg.

It rose up and died away and then there was only the sibilant voice of the wind, droning on and on, an eerie and otherworldly soundtrack to the fear that each and everyone felt deep into their bones.

"Get to the Spryte!" Coyle said. "Now! Go! Go!"

Gwen looked at him, her eyes bright and hunted-looking through the slit of her balaclava. "But Flagg–"

“Fuck Flagg,” Horn said, leading the charge.

Running in bunny boots is an adventure and they found themselves tripping and falling as much as they were gaining ground. Coyle’s heart was pounding, adrenaline kicking in and making his entire body tingle with exhilaration.

They made the Spryte and slammed the doors shut, locking them against what haunted the polar wastes.

“Get us out of here!” Coyle snapped.

But Horn did not have to be told. He threw the Spryte in gear, grabbed the brake bars and off they went. The heater was pumping out full blast but they still shivered. They didn’t even want to think about what had just happened.

The Spryte’s wipers were whipping back and forth, clearing snow, the headlights filled with agitated flakes. The drift wind was still throwing sheets at them and creating huge jumping shadows.

When he finally found his voice, Coyle got on the radio and called Clime, telling them they were en route to their position. And when Hopper asked if they’d found anything all Coyle would tell him was, “No survivors.” He hated even saying that, knowing that just about any station out there with a strong enough receiver could be listening in but Hopper demanded something.

“I’ll fill you in upon return,” Coyle said into the mic.

And at that precise moment something hit the Spryte.

It hammered into it like a freight train, the impact making the vehicle rock on its tracks and knocking the mic from Coyle’s hand. Horn, his face tight and corded in the dash lights, did not slow down. GPS was locked and he was not going to stop.

“That wasn’t the wind,” Gwen said.

“No,” Coyle told her. “It wasn’t.”

Something was out there, something strong enough to nearly stop a 3,000 pound vehicle dead in its tracks.

Nobody spoke.

They were all feeling it: the sense that they were far from safe, that whatever had devastated NOAA Polaris was still out there, hiding in the darkness and stalking them, using the storm as camouflage. They did not dare speculate as to what it might be.

Coyle just listened for it, knowing it was there.

He could feel its presence up his spine and in the gooseflesh that covered his arms and skin, creeping at the small of his belly. His mouth was so dry he could not swallow and so fixed were his eyes on what the headlights were revealing that he had to remember to blink.

Gwen's hand in his own was damp with sweat.

The snow blew around the Spryte like a heavy, claustrophobic sea fog, the wind roaring and whistling. The Spryte was not known for its stealth. It was a loud machine and you had to speak loudly to be heard in the cab. It was not unusual to return to camp after a trip in it with ringing ears.

But Coyle didn't hear the engine, the tracks cutting across the hardpack, he could only hear the wind, listening for the voice of the thing that was hunting them, knowing damn well it had not given up the chase.

And then–

Gwen tensed next to him, every muscle in her body seeming to draw upwards as she jerked at the sound the wind carried. It was a weird, almost feline screeching that echoed from the belly of the storm, chilling, piercing, unearthly. It rose up so loud it seemed that what made it was right next to the Spryte and then faded off into an obscene female cackling that sounded impossibly distant and then was lost altogether out across the ice fields.

Then something jumped in front of the Spryte.

They all saw it.

Just for a few seconds but enough so that they all gasped and pulled back in their seats, nearly cringing. It was some huge amorphous shape like liquid midnight, flowing and rippling and repulsively fleshy. The snow obscured it, then the headlights revealed it: a weird composite that looked like a reaching, corded mass of dead trees that had grown into one another in a mutiny of spiky limbs and then maybe four or five bodies strung together with a blue-black membranous skin that jutted with bony protrusions and

trailing boneless limbs. They clearly saw three heads whose faces were like melting wax and running slime.

And a fourth rising above the others . . . a gnarled, convoluted thing with a face like a grinning Halloween pumpkin and phosphorescent yellow eyes, something like hair atop its head that was not hair but undulant growths like slow-moving deep-sea grasses that were hideously alive and coiling.

Then the Spryte—barreling forward at its top speed of 30 mph—slammed right into it and the thing could not get out of the way. The Spryte hit it and clear slime splashed up over the windshield and the cab rocked as the tracks rolled over it, grinding it into the drift with a moist, pulping sound that went up everyone's backbone. The thing let out a hollow, maniacal cry that was partly human but mostly the angry roaring of some primeval beast.

Something skittered over the windows like spiders or clutching tendrils.

And then they were free of it and its agonized voice faded into the storm.

Coyle looked back only once and in the rear lights he saw a squashed mass of flesh splashed over the snow, something rising from it like a hundred whipping vines.

Then it was lost from sight.

He sank back into his seat, Gwen doing the same.

For thirty minutes no one spoke. There was only the wind and the snow whispering at the windows and Horn muttering under his voice, "Gonna get us home . . . yes sir . . . gonna fucking get us home . . ."

THREE

BROOMSTICK RIDE

The blackest ceremonies of the Sabbat... have an origin outside the time and space we comprehend.

—H.P. Lovecraft

1

POLAR CLIME STATION

"THE LIGHTS WENT OFF all over camp, Nicky," Special Ed was saying, shaking at the memory of it. "We can't account for it. Frye and Cryderman and Locke have been through every circuit in the place and nothing is damaged or fused. The lights just went out. The back-ups did not kick in. It was black as sin here and when the lights came back on . . . well, when they came back on, Slim was just gone."

"Just gone," Coyle said.

"Yes."

Coyle stood there in his ECWs, water dripping from them. He was filled to bursting with too many rioting emotions and he simply could not get a handle on them. Though he was not a violent person, it all bubbled up inside him and he had a mad desire to punch the HR rep right in the mouth. But he didn't. And he didn't because it was not Special Ed's fault. It was nobody's fault.

"And you heard nothing and saw nothing unusual?"

"No, not a thing. The lights just went out."

After what he'd seen at NOAA Polaris, Coyle was not in the mood to come back here and have more mysteries and weirdness shoved in his face. And neither were Horn or Gwen. But that's exactly what they got as soon as they pulled into camp. Gut was on them out in the Heavy Shop as they parked the Spryte. And after her there was a gauntlet of people—Ida and Danny Shin and The Beav. Even Cryderman who cared about nothing but Cryderman showed up. Harvey crawled out of T-Shack long enough to tell them that he thought the Masons were behind it. Most were concerned about Slim, but they also wanted to know what in the hell had happened at NOAA Polaris.

So he told them.

His first instinct was to not spread fear, but from his first telling to his last there was no way around it. He told the truth and people either were skeptical or alarmed.

Regardless, the crew at Polaris had been slaughtered and Flagg had joined them. And now Slim was gone.

"Jesus Christ, not Flagg, not Flagg," Special Ed kept saying. "He's . . . you know his cousin is–"

"Married to a senator, yeah I know, Ed. But, see, that fucking thing that took him, it didn't much care."

Coyle, Horn, and Gwen went through the entire story three times for Special Ed and Hopper. When they were done, Hopper looked very weary. So weary, he could not even talk rapid-fire. In fact, he did not seem to know what to do with himself. He sat down, stood up, paced his office, put his hands flat against the wall and breathed like he might hyperventilate. Nothing was "terrific" or "outstanding" today or even "an exceptional example of teamwork and prime productivity."

"None of this makes any sense," he finally said. "Nothing does this year."

He just didn't understand.

"I . . . I just don't get it. I don't know what's going on. The whole world is coming apart . . . everything's just going to hell. What's it all mean, Nicky?"

"Go talk to Locke, he'll tell you," Coyle said. "He'll tell you things you won't want to hear. All those things the NSF has been denying since Kharkov. Question is, Mr. Hopper: how bad do you want to know? How much sleep do you want to lose?"

Hopper didn't have much to say about that, so Coyle left him to the broken pieces of his ordered little world, watched him walk off in a daze. After Gwen and Horn went to their rooms, Coyle was still there with Ed, pelting Ed with questions about Slim.

Special Ed, of course, tried to down-play it in the finest HR tradition, but how could you down-play something like that? The lights went out for something like fifteen minutes. All of them. Not the power. The generators were still kicking out and everything was purring along just fine. Only the

lights went out. Explain that. And then while you were at it, explain how Slim disappeared from his room when the door was locked from the *inside.* Of course, Special Ed was quick to down-play that, too. Nobody knew for sure that Slim was actually *in* there; he probably just locked his door and dropped out of sight somewhere else. And as to the shambles that room was in . . . who could really say?

I can, that's who, Coyle thought, trying to swallow down his anger and frustration. *Things had been going to shit for Slim ever since he saw that thing under the tarp. Something goddamned spooky was going on with that kid and whatever it was, it arranged for the lights to go off so everyone else would be chasing their own shadows while he was snatched away.*

"We've organized three searches and found nothing," Special Ed admitted. "But I'm certainly hopeful that things will turn out well–"

"Shut up," Coyle told him.

"Nicky, I'm just saying–"

"You're talking shit, Ed. I know it. You know it. I swear to God if you start reciting the NSF line on company liability and missing persons procedure, I'm going to slap you right across the face."

Special Ed opened his mouth, then closed it again.

Coyle just stared at him for a long time. "There's nothing to be hopeful about, Ed. Things are happening at this station. They're happening at *all* the stations down here. Crazy shit I don't like to think about. But unlike five years ago when Kharkov went bad, it's not localized: it's spreading to the rest of the world now. We can pretend all we want that things are fine and dandy, Ed, but we both know better."

"Nicky . . ."

"Cassie's missing, Ed. So is Slim. That's two people in one fucking week. The whole crew at Polaris were slaughtered and what got them got Doc Flagg, too. I saw it. I saw what did it. We all did. I wish you had seen it, Ed. If you had you wouldn't be talking shit like this. You'd be scared. Just like I am."

Special Ed blinked his eyes rapidly as he did when you put him in a corner, but he did not dare argue the point. He knew things were happening

and the omens were just plain ugly, but he could not say so. Not as a good company man.

But he was fragmenting. All around the edges he was beginning to come apart and even the NSF, The Program, and all they stood for could not keep him together.

"Oh . . . Jesus Christ, Nicky . . . what are we supposed to do?"

But Coyle didn't have a clue.

2

SLIM'S ROOM.

He had heard again and again what it looked like in there, but you really had to see it to believe it. Yes, it was a shambles. Looked like old Slim had had the mother of all drunken, violent parties in there. And when he was done, a tornado danced through. Now Slim wasn't the neatest guy in the world, granted, but this was not just messy, it was sheer wreckage.

When Coyle opened the door, he gasped.

The room wasn't big and from one end to the other there was nothing but papers that had been torn and shredded and discolored. Some of them were actually a brownish-yellow in color and very brittle as if they had been exposed to great heat, but not enough to actually set them ablaze. The plasterboard walls were still stuck with tacks and bits of tape and over the bed there was a huge crack in the plaster like it had taken some enormous impact. But pushed *out* like the impact had come from within.

Coyle stepped around, sorting through the papers which were the remains of drawings and song lyrics and you name it. Whatever had happened here was devastating, completely devastating. The sheets and blankets had been yanked from the bed and drawers pulled open, clothes and books and letters strewn about. And on the wall opposite Slim's little desk there was a great stain on the white wall, a dark stain that was amorphous in shape, but very large. It almost looked like it was burned there.

That was unusual, perplexing. But what was on the wall next to it was positively spooky. In letters that looked burned like the image itself, it said:

GOD WILL NOT BE THE ONE THAT CALLS OF THEE FOR THEE IS THRICE NAMED BY THE DIVELLS OF OLD GATHER

There had apparently been more, but a great chunk of plasterboard had been broken out and reduced to powder. Coyle just stood there staring at it, silently forming the words with his mouth and wondering what in the hell Slim had been up to with this. Was it something from his dreams? Or was it something worse? Something which had been in his dreams that physically reached out for him?

" 'God will not be the one that calls of thee,' " Coyle said out loud, seeing if maybe those words would make sense with volume. "'For thee is thrice named by the divells of old–'"

"Divells," a voice behind him said. "Plural of *devill.* An archaic spelling of 'devil.'"

He turned around and Locke was standing there.

"I gathered that much," he said.

Locke smiled thinly. Very thinly. "How would you interpret that, Nicky?"

"How would you?"

Locke shrugged. "The spelling is archaic, as I said. If I had to identify it, I would say the usage might be colonial American, possibly seventeenth century. Could be colloquial British of the same period. That established, the next question would be why would Slim write something like that? Was he a student of the Colonial Period or Colonial witchcraft? No, not Slim. I spent a lot of time with him and to that kid witches were something that begged for candy on Halloween."

Coyle sat on the bed. "So where does that leave us?"

Locke just stared at the words. "Maybe this is a case of something as exotic as automatic writing, wherein the afflicted are under the influence of their own unconscious mind or that of another mind independent of their own? Or, perhaps, he saw this in his dreams and was driven to write it?"

"Except it wasn't written."

"No?"

"Put your hand on the wall. Feel the letters," he said. "Those aren't written, they're lightly etched. Burned in there, maybe."

Locke nodded. “Very good, Nicky. That means you’ve noticed something Hopper and all the others missed . . . or wanted to miss.”

“They’re scared, Locke. We’re all fucking scared.”

Locke simply raised an eyebrow at that. “Tell me, Nicky. Tell me everything you saw at NOAA Polaris.”

So he did. He went into detail, telling him everything he had seen from that transparent slime frozen in the lab to the bodies out in the snow. And he did not forget to mention Flagg or what they ran over with the Spryte.

Locke thought it over for a long time. “What do you make of it, Nicky?” he finally said.

“What do I think? I think some kind of thing or monster, call it what you want, came into that camp and killed them, tore them part, pissed slime over everything, then dragged them out into the snow and maybe fed on them. I think whatever it was came in an aluminum coffin. I think it was *delivered* there on purpose to do just what it did: kill.”

“Who would have delivered it?”

Coyle sighed. He hated this Devil’s Advocate shit. “I don’t know, Locke. Why are you asking me? You’re the guy with the crazy ideas. Maybe you should tell me.” He studied the floor. “Honestly? I don’t know . . . but I think it has something to do with that Kharkov business. I think it has everything to do with what we were talking about the other day. I think those things, those aliens, are active and they snatched away those people at Mount Hobb. They took Cassie and now Slim. And what we saw at Polaris is one of their pets, a weapon they’re gonna use against us.” He shrugged. “Of course, I’m just the cook . . . what do I know?”

Locke laughed. “Oh, Nicky, you’re so much more here and you know it. You’re probably the only mind here—other than my own, of course—that can or is willing to see the big picture.”

Coyle just studied his boots. He was dead tired. He needed to sleep, but he was beginning to wonder if he’d ever close his eyes again.

“I don’t wanna see the big picture,” he finally said.

“You don’t have a choice. None of us do. We need to accept what’s happening and take some kind of action before it’s too late. You know what’s

happening down here. You've seen enough now to know that skepticism is the province of frightened minds. You've seen what's happening worldwide. It's not going away." Locke was dead serious now. More than that he looked scared. "All around us the fruition of an ancient conspiracy is coming to pass. We've been invaded, man, only this invasion started two or three billion years ago when this planet was barren of life and *they* came here to seed it with this very moment in mind."

Despite himself, Coyle said: "I believe it. But will the others? Will the rest of the world? And what happens if they don't?"

Locke started walking from the room, paused in the doorway, and turned around. "If they don't, Nicky, this entire fucking world will be nothing but an immense alien hive with six months."

3

THE PERSONNEL OF THE station did not handle Flagg's death and Slim's disappearance very well.

Once Coyle, Horn, and Gwen had informed Hopper and Special Ed, it seemed that everyone knew within minutes. Like some mystical form of osmosis, the information was diffused through the cell membranes of the station, selectively flooding the crew and allowing each and every one of them to reach the worst possible conclusions about their future. The information passed body to body like a plague on a hot, dry wind, picking up speed and dark intent, slowly inflating with half-truths and out-right lies until it was more monster than plague. Something running loose among them that, figuratively at any rate, would not be satisfied until it had stacked all their blood-stained bones in tidy gnawed heaps.

What it left in its wake was a station crewed by people whose veins were clogged with the night-black juice of fear and whose brains were clouded by an infectious paranoia.

These people were not only frightened, but broken now.

Bled dry, ruptured, and disenfranchised by the very system that they openly reviled but secretly worshipped. For the system was the machine that kept them alive down there in the barren polar wastes. It kept them fed and safe and warm and once that machine malfunctioned and the wheels of The Program seized, there could only be chaos.

Horn hid out in the Heavy Shop. Coyle and Gwen hid away in her room and drank with Zoot. And that was how they avoided the chaos.

Meanwhile, Hopper's office was stormed by the troops which were led by Gut.

They all wanted answers and they intended on having them.

And to see them gathered like that, the station manager saw that he was bare inches from open revolt, for their eyes burned like the eyes of manic

political dissidents and revolutionaries who were giving their government, their command structure, one last chance to set things right before they grabbed the reigns and rode roughshod over them.

Gut was right at the front of the pack in her overalls, her face twisted in a perpetual grimace, the acid of working class intolerance bleeding from her pores. Ida was standing there confused and The Beav was scared shitless remembering those hot San Franciscan Nights of '68. Frye was in the back of the pack with Danny Shin and Locke, but mostly for the entertainment value of seeing Hopper and Special Ed get roasted on the same spit. Cryderman showed, smelling of Jim Beam and suggesting they all get good and fucking plowed because it might be their last chance. The FEMC crew didn't bother showing up and Eicke never left Atmospherics these days. Harvey was on duty at T-Shack.

So, except for a handful, they all showed, angry and tribal and demanding a blood sacrifice. And right away, the accusations were flying.

Cryderman said, "Flagg is dead! Cassie and Slim are missing! How many more have to drop out of sight before something's done?"

"How about three or four or five?" Danny Shin put in.

"Please, this is being blown out of proportion," Special Ed assured them. "You people are acting like children!"

Which went over like a hairy turd in the fondue pot.

"You hear that?" Frye said, stirring that pot. "Our fearless HR boy says we're acting like children! Hey, news flash, Ed, we ain't addressing you! We're talking to Hopper!"

"Please," Special Ed said once again, trying in vain to protect Hopper who was simply not up to it anymore. And as he did so, he was seeing the crew as not a collection of people he worked and lived with, but a single voracious entity that was about to chew up his ass in large bites. "We're doing everything we can. Please don't listen to gossip. This situation is not that drastic."

"No, two missing people is par for the course," The Beav said.

Hopper—who was no longer anyone's favorite basketball coach, but a sullen and confused man who didn't give a rat's ass about teamwork and

cooperation and station spirit—just stood there in the same clothes he'd been wearing for days, bundled against the cold, his hair mussed, his face unshaven, his eyes like two pissholes in a snowbank, and said, "What in the hell do you want me to do?"

Gut, big and masculine and red in the face, said, *"Do?* What in the hell kind of thing is that to say? Who's running this fucking dog-and-pony show? You're in charge, Hopper, you goddamn idiot! Something's happening to your people and I expect you to get off your numb white ass and do something about it! Quit pulling on Special Ed's crank and stand up and take fucking charge! That's why they pay you, isn't it?"

"We're doing everything we can."

Gut gasped. "Everything you can? Oh my sweet fucking twat! What're you gonna do? Form more search parties?"

"If need be."

"I think we tried that with Slim and his ass is still lost to the four winds! In case you haven't heard, Mr. Fucking Station Manager, Nicky and Little Gwenny Sweetcakes and goddamn Horn ran into a monster at NOAA Polaris! What're you gonna do about *that?* Wait around while it snacks on our asses? It's probably the same thing that took Slim and Cassie! It's out there and it's hiding! We searched this goddamn dump asshole to elbow and didn't even find Jimmy Hoffa's nutcup or Amelia Earhart's lost tampon string, let alone a monster! Now I wanna know what you're going to do! I want to know how we're supposed to protect our merry fat asses from whatever's out there that's stealing people! Have you contacted NSF? McMurdo? Have you done a goddamned thing or are you and Special goddamn Ed too busy shoving your heads up each other's collective asses to keep them warm? Do *something! Any fucking thing!* Call the NSF, call the Navy, call the ANG! Call up Ronald fucking Reagan or Howdy Doody's ghost on your ouija board, but do something!"

And Gut never knew it, but she was a catalyst.

Frye was urging the whole thing on, trying to stir the contents of the pot into one smelly mess, but it was Gut who did the job. She was out of control. Afraid. Frustrated. Pissed-off. Pretty soon not only was she shouting at Hopper, but they all were. Ida faded away with The Beav. Danny Shin

demanded that they be flown out of there, that there was no way he was spending the whole winter waiting for his number to come up.

Hopper just shook his head. "Nobody's going anywhere! This is the goddamn winter, people! The planes don't fly!"

"Bullshit," Gut said. "They air-lifted that woman from Pole Station that year when she had a tumor in her tit! If they can do it once, they can do it again!"

"That's right!" Shin chimed in.

"I'm not listening to this!" Hopper finally told them. "You people get back to work! This is all going into your files! You're out of control!"

And that, more than anything, scattered the lot of 'em.

Particularly Shin because he was a scientist and couldn't afford to have the NSF cut his grants. The others left, stomping away angrily, because Hopper *was* in charge. He'd always been the most uplifting, positive sort of guy, and now he was simply at the end of his rope. He wasn't playing hopscotch with them. He was telling them like it was. So the war party broke up, fading down A-corridor to the Community Room, Gut arguing with Shin and Shin arguing with Cryderman and Locke laughing at the lot of them saying they had just been carefully manipulated by their wallets.

When they were gone, Special Ed was just standing there like a wallflower looking for a slow dance and a shoulder to cry on.

"Well, that didn't go over so well," Frye said to him.

"I've never seen anything like this!" Special Ed said. "Do you have any idea what will happen when the NSF gets wind of this? Do you?"

"Yeah, yeah, Ed. They'll squat and shit all over our grants and contracts. About effing time I got out of The Program anyway." He turned away, saw the HR rep sulking, and went over to him. "Listen to me, Ed. I don't know what's going on with Hopper, but he's not exactly a guiding light for the rest of us. Things are happening that haven't ever happened before and he better get a grip, take charge of these people before it's too late. Because things are about to get ugly and if it comes to that, he's the only guy here who can head it off at the pass."

"He's under a lot of stress."

“We all are! So what? You better talk to him, tell him to grab them reigns and grab ‘em tight before this buggy goes right off the road and into the ditch. You hear me? We need some kind of leadership right now and that asshole is dropping the ball. You better talk to him.”

And with that, he left Special Ed standing there, wringing his hands.

4

MARCH 10

WINTER DESCENDED WITHOUT MERCY.

No more sunlight until late September at the very earliest.

Now came the darkness and the waiting and the isolation that was not just a word or an abstract idea, but something real and suffocating and forever. Winter in East Antarctica was like being dropped into the deepest, blackest, bleakest hole in the world. It was premature burial, polar entombment, and you could scream your head off, but no one would ever hear you in the perpetual night save those buried alongside you.

Winter was forever.

And at Polar Clime it was like this:

The temperature dropped and the wind howled. Sheets of snow and fine ice particles blew throughout the compound, sounding like buckshot as they glanced off the walls. They came with such velocity sometimes that if you went outside unprotected, they would lay you bare. And at others times, it was so silent out there that the distant sound of boots crunching through the snowpack was like thunder.

At night it got so cold that your water bottle and boots would freeze to the floor and people often went to bed fully clothed. It was so dry that there were humidifiers in every room running non-stop and still the static charges that built up seemed strong enough to knock you on your ass. Winter was a time at the stations for drinking and playing games and forming ridiculous societies and in-fighting. It was a time to pursue solitary pursuits and to get to know the inner person or God himself. It was a time for diversion and if you didn't have at least one, your own mind would open wide and suck you in or take bloody bites out of you until there was absolutely nothing left.

And this was why psychologists had always considered the Antarctic winter camp as a living laboratory for social and behavioral sciences.

Which it was, in effect.

When you crammed twenty rats from various colonies in a single box and expected them to form a seamless community you were asking a bit much. Previously established hierarchies and support systems were shattered. Behavioral routines fell to ash. Dominant individuals butted heads with other dominants and submissive types scurried around looking for a hole to hide in and a group to protect them. There was tension and jealously, alienation and despondency, delusions of persecution and rampant paranoia. Minor psychological aberrations became grossly inflated. Trifling obsessions became full-blown compulsions. Essentially, all the happy horseshit and sour milk of the human condition was put under the microscope and magnified.

But it wasn't all badness.

There were friendship and camaraderie, love and faith and even happiness. You just couldn't *expect* it was all. Because the stations were microcosms. The only difference between them and the real world was that everything down there was compressed and crowded and amplified.

By midwinter, people started doing a lot of staring and forgetting. They wondered just who in the hell they were locked up with. The workers called this getting "toasty" and medical professionals called it the "Winter-Over Syndrome." It was caused by changes in hormone levels due to prolonged exposure to darkness and the cold. By the end of winter, the crew did little else but stare. It was called "long-eye," a mild hypnotic state, the classic thousand-yard stare in a twenty-foot room.

People lose concentration. They stare at walls, at ceilings, right through one another. Sentences and stories are half-finished, picked back up days later or not at all and five individuals in the same room might engage in five separate conversations. People tend to think out loud on a daily basis. The urge to go over the edge or tip-toe around its perimeter or to simply dive right into the void becomes stronger and stronger with the passage of days.

And this was in the course of an ordinary winter.

But this winter was special.

For there was a catalyst this year. Something immense and deadly and beyond human comprehension. And its influence made everyone doubt their own sanity and the sanity of the world at large. Made them question the very glue that held together the reality that they had always taken for granted.

Under the ice, it waited.

It was endlessly patient. It had been brooding and percolating for millions and millions of years and was about to reach complete fruition. And when the eggshell sheared open and this particular birth climbed free, there would be no going back. There would only be a single screaming descent into the blackness that would bring the human race face to face with who and what they were and what they would never be again.

5

EMPEROR ICE CAVE,
BEARDMORE GLACIER
MARCH 12

AS HE MOVED DEEPER into the Emperor, Lieutenant-Commander Beeman suddenly stopped.

He could not at that moment say precisely why. He was on the walkway that led down to the gigantic ice cavern far below. The walkway followed a natural passage that slowly angled down into the hard blue ice for hundreds of feet until it opened into the cavern. The passage itself had more twists and turns to it than a crawling kingsnake and twenty feet into it, you lost sight of the Hypertats, sheds, and generator station just inside the mouth of the Emperor itself. Then there was only that ancient blue ice pushing from all sides.

"Something wrong, Commander?" Warren said behind him.

Beeman almost jumped, turning quickly and stared at Warren in his ECWs, his bearded face peering from the slit of his red parka.

"What?"

"I said, is something wrong? You stopped."

"No, I'm fine."

"Listen, you don't wanna go look at the thing, I'm okay with that."

Beeman clenched his teeth, a tension digging into him that he did not quite understand. "Don't be silly."

But he still wasn't moving and he did not know why.

It was as if an invisible hand had just stopped him dead and he didn't seem to have the willpower to go on. He felt . . . isolated and vulnerable. As if there was danger now, danger in the ice, and something inside him

recognized such. Waves of fear rolled up from his belly and spread out through his chest in sharp gyrations. He swallowed, tried to make sense of it.

"I was just . . . amazed at the age of the ice," he said.

Warren nodded. "It is something, isn't it? Down here in this ice . . . hundreds of thousands and millions of years old. This whole damn continent is like that. So fucking old, you know?"

"Yeah."

Aluminum poles had been drilled into the floor of the passage with ice screws and set with incandescents, all of them connected by an electrical cable that led back up into the generator. Long as the generator worked, there was light. But without it . . . God, blackness that was inconceivable.

Beeman looked around, seeing the ice and feeling it.

It's just ice. I know it's just ice. But... but I can feel the age of it and maybe something older, something that was here before the ice. Something that's still here . . . something . . . active . . .

The passage was roughly circular, cut right through the glowing blue-green glacial ice that absorbed the artificial lighting and bathed everything in a soft aquamarine glow. An eerie blue phosphorescence that was almost like neon, but murky and shifting. The ceiling was thirty feet overhead and hung with a forest of gleaming icicles, the walls twenty feet apart and formed of runnels, ice falls, and intricate candlewax flows of that ghostly bluish ice that looked positively surreal.

It made red parkas look purple. It turned faces a pale green.

"Commander?"

"Gimme a minute, will ya?" Beeman said, breathing in and out. He needed time, God yes, he needed more time. Time to relax his muscles which were bunched tight and time to settle his nerves down which were jumping like live wires.

He looked around, breathing, breathing.

The temperature in the ice tunnel hovered at around a constant zero.

And that was the beauty of ice and snow, the physics of them. Regardless of how cold it was—and it hadn't been above -40° in days, wind chills pushing it down to like sixty below out on the Beardmore—ice and snow stayed at a constant 32° Fahrenheit. So the cave provided a shelter from the elements. Because you could conceivably work outside when it was forty below for short periods and people had been doing just that in Antarctica for years. It was doable. The danger was not so much the cold, but the wind. It took hold of that cold and pushed it at you and it went right through you like steel blades.

So in the depths of the cave, zero was very acceptable.

Beeman knew it wasn't the cold that was bothering him. And even that uncanny illumination, while disconcerting, was not at the root of this. It was something else. Something that had gripped him like an icy fist and would not let him go.

He was staring down the passage, feeling its age, and thinking about what Dryden and the others had chopped from the ice below. Maybe that more than anything was filling him with a crawling foreboding, an almost instinctive horror of going any further. But he had to. He knew had to. He couldn't lose face with Warren. If he did that . . . well, then he was no better than that sonofabitch Biggs.

We're going down to look at Dryden's specimen, Biggs. You coming?

Fuck that. I ain't going. I don't wanna look at that thing.

It's dead, you idiot. It can't hurt you.

Sure, sure. The ones they dug out at Kharkov that year were dead, too. No thanks, Big Kahuna, but I ain't letting one of those fucking mummies eat my mind.

You're acting like a scared little boy.

I am scared and you should be, too.

No, Beeman would not let himself become a frightened little boy. He was Navy. He was an officer. He would go down there. He would look at that thing that had been sealed in the ice all these years and he would not flinch from it.

"Commander? We going or what?"

Something inside him recoiling from what was down there, Beeman led the way down the passage with lumbering, mechanical steps as something in his soul began to bleed.

6

PHASE I, CRARY LAB,
MCMURDO STATION,
ROSS ISLAND

IN HIS HEAD THERE were voices, but none were so loud as the one that kept saying: *"Relax . . . now you must relax. Let them see how calm you are, how reasonable ... then they'll let you go."*

John Polchek heard the voice saying this again and again and it took him a few moments before he realized that it was *his* voice. Lately, he had been talking to himself a lot, but how could it be helped when all his colleagues were either fools or hypocrites? His was the only mind that seemed rational these days. The only one that recognized the threat that was rising even now to engulf the world.

I'm your only hope, you fucking idiots.

Dr. Munse came into the room. A couple of paramedics from Medical were out in the hallway, bandaging up Matheson's slashed ribs. *You'll be okay, don't worry.* That's what they kept saying to him, not realizing that they were patching-up a . . . *monster.*

Polchek watched Munse's face, his sad, pitying eyes. The bastard! But . . . no, he would not rage. *Look at me, Munse. See how easy I am with it all. I'm hardly a raving lunatic. Peaceful. Intelligent. Introspective. Hardly a danger.*

Munse sighed and left the room.

You rotten motherfucker! You're probably one of them, too!

Lying on the cot, Polchek kept pulling at the restraints, trying to sort out all the things in his cramped little mind. Drool ran down his chin and sweat beaded his brow but he was not even aware of it.

His office. They had tied him up in his *own* office. His books, his papers . . . it all seemed so meaningless now.

Just as meaningless as all the works of men would soon be if something wasn't done about the threat, *the threat beneath the ice.*

Now he could watch and wait and warn.

But they don't believe me, none of them do. They think I'm crazy.

"Ssshhhh," he cautioned himself. "You are not crazy. You are the only sane one left."

Once upon a time, long before he had attacked another scientist with a knife, Polchek had been a microbial ecologist from Ohio State University's Department of Environmental Microbiology. He had come to Antarctica on an NSF grant as part of a multi-disciplinary team that was studying the geochemical and microbiological conditions of glacial and accretion ice core samples from the Dry Valleys of McMurdo Sound.

A dream job in the beginning.

And now a nightmare as he saw the truth of what the ice concealed at the bottom of the world. He had lost complete interest in paleo-organisms and bacterial phylotypes, electron microscopy and epifluorescence, DNA extraction and molecular analysis.

That was who and what he had been.

Before the dreams came to him.

Before he began putting things together.

Before he saw the truth.

Soon, very soon now, they would all know what he knew.

They didn't pay attention when it happened at Kharkov Station, he thought as he wringed his hands, bunching them into fists. *They swept it under the rug and went back to the same bullshit. The fighting and political games and corporate swindling. The hating and wars and intolerance. They didn't take the hint that the Kharkov Tragedy was the only warning this world was going to get . . .*

But maybe you couldn't really blame the world at large.

They were ignorant and happily so.

Your common men and women of every nation only knew what they were told, what those in power decided they should know. They were never

tipped off to the immensity of the horror born of antiquity that was preparing to engulf the planet. The NSF had been one of the key players in watering down the events at Kharkov Station. The truth made for extremely bad PR, so they handed the mess to their spin doctors and perception managers and it was all made palatable for consumption by the masses.

A cover-up.

Hardly the first, but with the way things were going and what was beginning to happen everywhere, probably the last.

They had covered up the Callisto thing, too.

Nobody was saying too much about that around Crary, but you could bet they were thinking it. When that megalithic structure rose from the ancient crust, the feed to McMurdo was cut on purpose. But it would turn up. Because someone in Antarctica at one of the stations must have been burning it. It stood to reason. Give it another week and it would be all over the internet.

But it would be too late by the time people realized.

"YAAAAAHHHHHH!" he suddenly shrieked. *"TOO LATE, TOO LATE, TOOOOOO FUCKING LATE! THEY'LL EAT YOUR MINDS! THEY'LL DRAIN YOUR INTELLECTS DRYYYYYYY–"*

One of the paras came in, Munse. "Take it easy, man." He had a syringe with him. "I'm going to give you something that will help you relax."

The syringe.

The needle.

No, no, no . . . not the NEEDLE . . . not the DRUGS . . . I must be awake . . . THEY can get to you if you're asleep . . .

Too late. It was already in his veins.

Polchek had tried to warn the others of the Dry Valleys team—Benson, Krieg, Herzog. But they, of course, had turned away from him. So he went directly to Dr. Munse. They had been colleagues for years. More than colleagues. Friends, good friends.

"We can't sit here and do nothing," Polchek said to him, whispering in his face. "Those things have been under the ice and down in those lakes

beneath the glaciers, just waiting in their dead cities and now they'll wait no more. Don't you see?"

"John," Munse had said in his calmest voice, "there was never any evidence of extraterrestrial intervention at Kharkov. The ruined city Gates said he found could never be located. And that whole insane conspiracy of this ancient race harvesting human populations . . . it was fantasy."

"Fantasy? Dr. Munse . . . *Bob* . . . please . . . think about it. You know what Dryden is doing up at the Emperor Cave. You heard same as I what he chopped out of the glacial ice! It's one of those things! It may be long dead, but its mind is active, diabolical, and dangerous! The living ones use those old ice mummies as conduits for their energies . . . they're part of some network we can never fully understand!"

"John . . . you need to relax, okay?"

But Polchek could see it in his eyes: the skepticism slowly giving way to belief and the belief becoming fear. *Yes, yes, yes, through fear comes truth!*

Munse would not admit to it, though. "It's true that Dryden has found something in the ice. It may very well turn out to be some sort of extraterrestrial creature . . . *maybe.* But that hardly gives credence to the rest of the wild stuff. C'mon, John, that's fringe science. We both know it."

Polchek almost broke down into tears right there. "It comes in my dreams . . . things are channeled to me or maybe I'm more sensitive to the psychic projections . . . but I see those dead cities, I see what lives in them, and I know what's in store for us."

Munse rose to escort him from his office, but Polchek trapped him there behind his desk. "For God's sake don't turn me away like this! I'm not an idiot! The ancient hive has come out of dormancy! The aliens . . . they'll turn us into witches! *Wiiiitches!* Then we'll be like them—reading minds, moving things with pure thought, divining the future! It's what they do and what they want *us* to do. Don't you see?" Polchek tapped his temples with index fingers that shook badly. "It's . . . it's not like in those old movies. They don't take over our bodies! They don't possess us! They don't have to! They engineered . . . *imperatives* into us millions of years ago . . . genetic imperatives. They will activate those imperatives now . . . we will be witches! *They don't need to possess us, we'll possess ourselves!*

"No, no, Bob . . . please listen . . . in every population there will be a . . . an overseer, an overlord, call it what you want . . . one whose ancient alien faculties are fully developed," he explained, panting and sweating by that point as if what he was birthing to his old friend took an exertion that exhausted him. "One that will call the others together maybe . . . amplify what's already in them . . . turn a select population into a great psychic battery that can be culled, drained by the aliens themselves! Don't you see? We have one here amongst us now–"

"That's enough, John, you're overwrought."

"Matheson! Matheson is the one! I've been watching him for some time! *He's the one! He's the witch!*"

But all that got him in the end was that Munse told him to go back to the dorm and lay down. He needed rest and quiet. He was working too hard. And that was not a request from Munse but an *order* as team leader.

That was four days ago.

Since then . . . Munse had not allowed him at the lab.

They were all unified against him and he could see the looks on their faces. In fact, he could practically hear their thoughts.

Look at Polchek! Jesus, he's petrified! He's acting like he's trapped in some existentialist version of The Invasion of the Body Snatchers. *Except this time it's not aliens or Cold War political/social allegory, but fucking space witches jumping out of seed pods. Good God!*

None of them wanted to be around him now.

He was a diseased cell in their midst.

Every time he went into the lab—ignoring Munse's orders—they cringed. All of them sweating bullets, just terrified of being in such close physical proximity with the crazy man. Way they were acting, you would have thought he was going to sink his fangs right into their necks.

Idiots.

They did not realize the threat Matheson was to them. Maybe Matheson had been the pride of the Glaciology Department at Montana State . . . but *that* Matheson was dead.

This Matheson was a monster.

They'll never let you roam free, not after today.

Polchek told himself he must remain calm. *Do not rave and act like a crazy man. Do not play into their hands. Let them see how sane you are. How balanced your mind is.*

Across the room. His desk drawer. There was a knife with a shiny seven-inch blade. Just one more chance to kill the witch, one more chance.

I'll show you for what you are, witch.

I get free and I'll fucking gut you! I'll pull your witch-guts out and spill your witch-blood and burn you, burn you, burn you . . .

The paras took him out through "the spine" which was the corridor that connected the labs of Crary—Phase I: Biology, Phase 2: Earth Sciences, etc. None of them knew or could know just how late it was, but soon . . . soon . . .

Polchek closed his eyes as the sedative took hold.

7

POLAR CLIME STATION

WHEN COYLE GOT BACK to his room from the Galley there was a package outside the door from Locke.

Wrapped up in plain brown paper and held together with a lot of packing tape, it could have been just about anything. Hell, maybe even a birthday present or a very late Christmas gift. Somehow, though, Coyle figured it was none of those. Whatever Locke had deposited outside his door would be nothing festive or cheery, but something of a darker variety.

He took it inside with him and sat at his little desk, just staring at it, thinking, *this is going to ruin my day, isn't it?*

Sighing, he slit the package open and found himself staring at a large hardcover book called *A Gathering of Witches: Witchcraft, Devil-Worship, and Witch-Lore Through the Ages*. On the cover there was a reproduction of a woodcut featuring a bent-over old woman holding court with a goatish man with horns. Around them, human limbs were hung from tree branches and sprouting from a cauldron the woman was stirring.

Coyle just shook his head. "What the hell is this about?" he said under his breath.

There was a note from Locke:

Nicky,

Haven't been able to hook up with you lately. Too busy. I found some interesting things in this book. Check out the pages I marked. We'll talk later.

He just sat there a moment.

Locke had the pages marked with sticky notes and the first such page showed another woodcut of a woman who was hanged from a tree with a fire burning beneath her. The Caption read: *"Suffolk 1667, Margaret Haritay, executed by witchfinders. She claimed that a great 'antient wing'd Beaste of*

many eyes and colours' taught her the secret of flight in Twelve-Acre Wood and that she 'dide take anighted flight with witches and divells and the Beaste itself on Midsummer's Eve.' Haritay was hanged, then burned for the 'Willfule Bewitch'g of the village of Pyecutte which she dide at the Beaste's request.'

Coyle scanned through the text, looking for more references to the winged devil, but finding none. Just mention of a plague of sorts sweeping Pyecutte that caused dozens of people to go stark raving mad. Haritay was found guilty, of course, but refused to name the members of her coven even under torture. Physical examination of her person discovered the *"Divell's Mark"* in the form, oddly enough, of a V-shaped incision on the back of her neck just beneath the base of the skull.

Haritay mentioned that the beast had given her a familiar which she named "Griddengyre." The familiar had *"no definite shape, was a creep'g awfulness as of entrails which tooke shape of which was nearest."* Whatever that meant. Apparently the familiar enjoyed the blood of children. Whether it could be believed or not, after Griddengyre had devoured and bled dozens of sheep it was trapped in a cave in Twelve-Acre Wood and burned to ashes. This, apparently, after it had nearly destroyed the village of Pyecutte.

The "wing'd Beaste" was interesting, of course, though it really meant nothing. These demons and what not were probably archetypes. Locke had mentioned this. Not meant to represent anything living, but a memory of something long-forgotten in the mists of the past.

Coyle flipped pages until he found the next sticky note.

Another woodcut which showed a devil of sorts in the forest. It almost looked like some sort of tree with its furrowed, trunk-like body and sticklike appendages, a crown of horny branches atop its head. The most interesting thing was the huge bat wings extending from its body. The caption read: *The Devil of Hogenhaus Forest, the Hartz Mountains 1333.* Coyle stared at it for some time. No, it was not an exact illustration of an Old One or Elder Thing, but a pretty damn close approximation. Like something somebody might have seen before running away or a composite creature drawn by an artist from several eyewitness accounts or folktales.

"Don't read too much into this," he said to himself.

He scanned the text until he found mention of the Hogenhaus Devil, as it was known. Apparently, it was worshipped by a coven of German witches who were greatly feared in the region because the creature had taught them a technique known as the "migration of minds" in which they could, by reciting certain words and concentrating on a wooden image of their victim, force their mind into his or her body and take them over for a period of time. The witches had done so with a local magistrate and a minister who were interfering with their activities. They made the magistrate commit suicide and the minister attempt to rape a local girl in full view of dozens of witnesses.

Coyle started thinking about those psychic gifts Locke had talked about that were in us all supposedly, put there by the Old Ones to make us like them.

The author went on, mentioning how the descriptions of the Hogenhaus Devil were very similar to those that had come out of Siberia in the 17th century and the Pyrenees in the 15th, Prague in the 13th century and Egypt in the 5th. Comparable devils were known to Aborigine tribes of the Australian outback and the Bushmen of the Kalahari in Botswana.

In 1099, during the Crusades, a mummified creature of this type was discovered in a subterranean temple in Jerusalem during the bloody siege of that city and destroyed . . . along with its worshippers.

This same devil was known in Sumer in the 25th century BC and was worshipped in the 11th by a fervent Chaldean cult in Babylonia. And there was a very intriguing tale handed down orally generation to generation among the Inuit of the Baffin Bay region that told of the sky being black with a swarm of such creatures, that the buzzing of their wings was louder than storm winds. According to this legend, an Inuit village on what is now known as Ellesmere Island was emptied by the swarm, that the inhabitants were carried off into the sky. That peculiar legend was thought by anthropologists to be many thousands of years old, handed down father to son and mother to daughter. And in a subsurface cave system in Belgium, badly worn Neanderthal cave paintings approximately 60,000 years old seemed to show a large tribe being taken up into the air by winged creatures

that bore a remarkable resemblance to "modern" accounts of the Hogenhaus Devil.

Coyle wanted to toss the book in the corner and forget about it all, but he couldn't. It was all there and it always had been. It was only a matter of looking and connecting disparate geographical areas and time periods. Regardless, it was there.

He paged through the book and there were other historical and folkloric references ranging from Assyrian temples to Scandinavian sagas. Locke had been very thorough in his research as had the author, a professor of classical archaeology out of Cambridge. Here were Celtic myths of wind demons called the "Dawn Reapers" and blasphemous statues of such devils in Ireland and Wales to which blood offerings were made as recorded by Roman scholars; Nigerian folk tales of winged devils carrying entire villages up to heaven; and the whispered tales of Germanic barbarian tribes.

Too much. It went on and on.

Coyle would have tossed the book aside at that point, but he found something a little closer to home.

It concerned the infamous "Arkham Devil-Cult" in Massachusetts of the 17th century, a hard time for witches in Colonial New England. The Arkham Devil-Cult, or Witch-Cult, apparently held Sabbat in some shunned, dark ravine beyond a place called Meadow Hill during the dark nights of the four major witches' holidays: Candlemas, May-Eve, Lammas, and Halloween. Here, they worshipped at some ancient white stone which sat in the ravine where vegetation refused to grow. This ravine had long been a place avoided by both colonists and Indians alike due to its unpleasant history of apparitions, unexplainable noises and high-pitched sounds. Early colonists claimed that staring into the ravine would give you a terrible headache and that those that dared visit it often saw ghostly, monstrous figures and objects —tree branches and heavy stones and leaves—that blew about and flew through the air when there was no wind. The local Narragansett tribe claimed that it was haunted by a large winged creature with a dozen burning red eyes, that was sometimes ghostly and ethereal and sometimes fleshy and solid. It often exuded a pale phosphorescence that could burn your flesh. To look upon this thing would empty your mind. Tribal shaman often went

there and had nightmarish visions that stayed with them throughout their lives. The stone itself was apparently hewn from some form of meteoric quartz by a banished sect of the Narragansett centuries and centuries before.

During the nights of the witches' holidays were times of great terror in Arkham, for children often went missing and noises were heard from the sky and the earth trembled and shook.

The Arkham Devil-Cult was greatly feared because of its power. Witches from the cult that had been brought to trial admitted, under duress, that a great hideous winged devil had shown them the secrets of the outer spheres, how to physically vanish and move through solid matter, and to jump from place to place over great distances via the manipulation of certain esoteric figures, formula, and the distortion of unknown angles. Modern conspiracists claimed that this was evidence that this creature, probably of extraterrestrial origin, had taught the Witch-Cult the primal, unguessable secrets of quantum physics and space/time distortion. Although others claimed it meant nothing, that these same conspiracists were linking black magic and Einsteinian physics into some impossible proto-science that could not possibly exist.

Essentially, they said, it was all randy bullshit.

On May-Eve, 1691, a Congregational minister named Daniel Hooper, incited by the works of Cotton Mather, hid himself in the ravine to learn the identity of the witches. He was found four days later on a hilltop seven miles away, naked and badly bruised and scratched, his eyes struck mad with fear. After nearly a month of convalescing, he claimed (in writing) that he, *"Dide wytnesse a divers covven of wytches number'g thyrteen upon ye Fryday E'en and dide heare great shriekes and fryghtfull noisess inn that spirit'd ravin beyond Meddowe Hille whereof I speak, whereon I was badly terrifyed and affear'd: anon, I duly descried an awfull discoverye of these wytches hold'g congress with a darke and diabolicall figure of extreame foulnesse, himm being of corruptnesse and filthe rais'd upp frome Hell, the adversarye lykenesse to the Divell as writ in ye Bible: wing'd and of greate size with many eyes that burn'd lyke redde as of bloode and possess'd of a voice as of pyp'g cycada. Such things descried bye others at yr Hallow'en and Candelmas rites. This Divell dide bestowe crawl'ng spyders or such vermin unto the wytches as gifts for foul magick and conjur'g. I owne that thiss statemente I tell of woulde be true."*

Hooper didn't have much of a life after that.

He was shunned and lived by himself, was considered mad. He claimed that the Devil walked through the walls of his house and called him by name. No one would have anything to do with him whatsoever, claiming that he was "hex'd and oft visit'd bye spirits" and tales sprung up like weeds around the poor man. Several people claimed to have seen a winged hobgoblin lighting off the roof of his house at Midsummer and others claimed to see several such creatures buzzing about like corpse flies. Hooper rarely went into the city for he was known to all and had been beaten on several occasions and publicly stoned on yet another. Horses would not go near his house. They reacted the same as they did when they neared the old ravine, whinnying and racing about in circles and had broken free of their harnesses on several occasions.

On Halloween night of 1693, a terrible wind rushed through Hooper's house though it was calm everywhere else in Arkham. Screams and strange noises were heard like throbbings and pipings and ear-piercing squeals that terrified half the city. Hooper's house stood in shambles by morning. He was found in it, dead, having supposedly committed suicide. He left a note which said: *"I hadde bin nam'd bye Them thrice."*

The house was burned to the ground and the yard salted.

It would be well over a hundred years until anyone dared make use of the property. And then only for a warehouse stockyard.

What was interesting in all this was that when Keziah Mason, a member of the Arkham Devil-Cult, was arrested during the witch-scare of 1692, certain things were found in her house on East Pickman Street, a house which would be forever known as the "Witch-House." Among her scribbled papers which made little sense whatsoever—she being barely literate—was mentioned again and again that the cult worshipped and interacted with "*Them Old Ones.*" According to contemporary accounts of the time, she was the prototypical hunched-over old hag and was said to have leering red eyes and carried a large unpleasant rat which was thought to be her familiar.

After naming the members of the coven, Mason was condemned to death, but then disappeared from her locked cell at the Salem gaol.

She left on the walls a series of odd, unintelligible geometrical formulae in her own blood, apparently, that were quickly scrubbed clean. And particularly after a magistrate traced those cabalistic figures, abstract curves, and distorted angles with his hand and his fingers were seen to momentarily fade and become transparent so that they could be clearly seen through. It was thought to be Devil's work. When the High Sheriff attempted to arrest the other members of the Witch-Cult, they had disappeared like Mason, leaving only those same figures and formulae on the walls.

Another interesting point: physical examination of Keziah Mason had found a V-shaped cutting on the nape of her neck just below the base of the skull. The author thought that was intriguing, but did not make much of it saying that throughout history witches had been found with assorted marks —cuts and incisions and scars etc.—and most of these were probably inflicted by the witchfinders themselves.

And that was a rational, realistic explanation, but Coyle wasn't sure if he was buying it. Maybe that V-cut meant nothing and maybe it meant everything.

Another side-note: in 1928, a mathematics student named Walter Gilman was found dead in the upper floors of the Witch-House, apparently attacked by rats, but in the weeks before his death he complained of vivid dreams of Keziah Mason, her familiar, and strange winged extradimensional entities shaped like tapering cylinders that walked on stout tentacles and had starfish-shaped heads, the tips of these appendages which were set with eyes.

There was no doubt in Coyle's mind what these entities in fact were.

Later writers mentioned that Gilman was obsessed by the possible connection between theoretical mathematics and the whispered truths behind black magic formulae. These entities that tormented him, it was claimed, were in league with Mason, whom they had taught the vagaries of multi-dimensional physics and time/space distortion, vortexual matter displacement and interspatial transmission.

At this point, Coyle threw the book aside.

It was obvious what Locke was getting at with all this.

Witchcraft, sorcery, black magic, and all that business were not the products of human imagination and man's ceaseless attempt to explain and

control natural forces and phenomenon, but something else entirely. For once you stripped away the superstition and myth and old wives' tales, there was a system of logic here. A highly advanced alien science that involved physics, mathematics, and psychic ability.

Keziah Mason must have been one of those rare individuals throughout history that were born with those latent psychic gifts fully activated: a witch, sorcerer, conjuror . . . they would have been known by many names in many lands. But it was these people who would have discovered these alien sciences either through their abilities or by coming into psychic contact with the aliens or by the Old Ones themselves leaving scraps of information in remote places that adepts and scholars would find and translate and pass down to the like-minded.

Coyle sat there for some time trying to convince himself it was all utter bullshit. But he knew better. Things were coming to light now. It was all there, the ultimate truth shivering in the ancient shadows of witchcraft and blatant superstition.

Keziah Mason was not a witch. Not really.

She was a human member of the alien hive and, ultimately, what all men and women and children would become when those controls in our minds were unlocked globally.

The witch-swarm.

8

EMPEROR ICE CAVE

WARREN DIDN'T WANT TO see the thing.

He really didn't.

He already didn't like the way it was making everyone act, spiking stress levels and giving everyone awful nightmares, but he knew he had to go. Beeman wanted him to and that decided it. Besides, Beeman had been acting funny ever since Dryden called up the Hypertat and described to him what they had found in the cavern.

He was almost afraid to let Beeman go down there alone.

Yes, Beeman was an asshole, a rigid military type who thought with his balls instead of his brains, but Warren knew he was part of their team and recognized his value. They needed each other. Regardless of what Biggs said, they needed each other.

And Beeman was in a bad way.

Like the discovery of that thing had laid something open inside him and the only way he could heal himself was by looking at what frightened him, what wounded him. All the way down to the cavern, he kept stopping, cocking his head like he was listening for something. But there had been nothing but the sound of the ice itself . . . that primordial sound of creaking and cracking and shifting. The music of the glacier.

Warren was disturbed by what had been found, but it was not until they made the cavern and he saw it there encased in ice that the impact of the thing hit him. It was like a radio had been cranked full blast in his head—just a shrieking barrage of static and whining white noise that made his jaws lock tight, squeezed tears from his eyes that froze on his cheeks, and cycled a thrumming headache to life in his brain that he thought might blow out the back of his skull.

That was what looking at the thing had done to him.

His limbs shook, his heart palpitated, his vision went blurry . . . and the next thing he knew he was down on his knees before the thing, vomiting on the ice, clouds of vile-smelling steam wisping up into his face.

And then hands were taking hold of him and voices were asking him if he was all right.

But he couldn't answer just then.

He really couldn't do a thing.

His senses were shut right down along with his mind and the only clear and rational thought that came through the haze was a creeping invasive knowledge that there was no going back now. That once you had seen something like this and acknowledged what it was, nothing could ever be the same again.

And this was the aftereffect of looking upon the thing.

And, worse, having it look at *him*.

9

DRYDEN WAS INTRIGUED BY their reactions.

Not only were they instantaneous, but positively violent and physical.

Interesting. When they'd located the specimen in a narrow vertical fissure at the rear of the cavern, his own reaction had been a curious mixture of fear and awe. Stone had gasped for breath. And Kenneger, for reasons only Kenneger understood, began to laugh with a cold dry cackling.

Those had been first reactions.

It had been several days now since they chopped it out in a single block of ice and man-hauled it out of the crevice. Something that would have been near-impossible if the floor of the crevice had not been made of slippery, glossy ice. But now here it was. You got used to it after awhile. Not comfortable with it exactly, but accustomed to it the way you might become accustomed to a malignancy inside you that had no intention of leaving . . . this side of the grave.

Lieutenant-Commander Beeman had not spoken while Warren had his episode. He had not even gone to the man's aid. He just stood there, staring, slapping his ice-axe against his leg after the tarp was pulled off the specimen, almost transfixed. While Stone took Warren away to the Polar Haven to rest in the warmth, Dryden stayed out there with Beeman and Kenneger.

And if Dryden was intrigued by the reaction of the men from above, then Kenneger was almost amused. There had always been something quite cold and almost cruel about the hydrologist, but it was much worse now. Much worse since he looked upon the thing. When Warren folded up, he smiled. He actually *smiled.*

Beeman just shook his head. "So this it, eh?" he said like the thing was not exerting an overwhelming influence upon him. Like it was nothing. "So this is the big, bad boogeyman everyone's afraid of down here?"

"More or less," Dryden said.

Beeman spit on the ice and then spit again as if his mouth was filling rapidly with saliva the way it did right before someone threw up. "Well . . . well . . . it's one ugly prick. I'll give it that much."

Kenneger kept smiling. "Oh, come now, Commander. Beauty being in the eye of the beholder and all that. I'm sure this creature wouldn't consider you attractive either. Nor would a spider. But they might find their own appearances riveting."

"Riveting, eh?" Beeman said, blowing out a cloud of frost. "Well, only a fucking scientist would think something like that."

Dryden raised an eyebrow.

He knew Beeman quite well by this point. He was dutiful, efficient, conscientious, almost servile to the higher mantra of the U.S. Navy itself . . . but he generally kept his opinions to himself like a good little cog in the machine and when he did voice them, they were usually directly in line with naval policy. He was always careful of what he said, what he did, his future in the Navy being dependent on his conduct and his ability to keep his mouth shut.

But now, apparently, that had changed.

There was something in Beeman's eyes that had not been there before, a dirty sort of light, an intensity and maybe an intolerance for what had been chopped from the ice and maybe even for science in general.

Though Dryden's winter project here in the Emperor was NSF-sanctioned, most of it was underwritten by the Navy. And that's why they'd stuck him with Beeman. So the Navy would have a visible presence in the proceedings. Dryden hadn't wanted the military anywhere near this. But the powers that be had insisted.

Thinking about it, he grinned inwardly.

A game. That's what it was. Once the ice cave had been located, they brought Dryden in to run the project. He selected whom he wanted. Got any materials or resources necessary. And all for a glaciology study that could probably have waited for spring. Winter field projects were very risky with the cold and weather and isolation, but the NSF had been most adamant

that research begin. Dryden wasn't stupid. With the Navy involved and the stories filtering out of Antarctica since the Kharkov Tragedy, he could put two and two together.

What they had found in the fissure was what this was about.

What it had always been about.

Standing there with Beeman and Kenneger, Dryden looked away from the men, studying the mammoth cavern around him. It was spectacular, really. You could have tucked a city block neatly into it and still had plenty of room. The walls were formed of that glossy electric blue-green ice which was set in gigantic columns, shimmering ridges, and sparkling towers. There were numerous crevices and tunnels, some leading deeper into the glacier itself and others opening up into bottomless crevasses. Everywhere he looked, branching dendritic ice crystals grew in amazing profusion and crystalline complexity, the ceiling arched like a dome, thousands of giant icicles suspended up there. The ice refracted the artificial lighting, creating an almost luminous field of rich blue illumination.

As a glaciologist, Dryden knew that ice caves were formed by the movements of the glaciers themselves, by seasonal periods of thaw and freezing. They were not static things generally, sometimes ones that had been accessible for years were sealed by the glaciers while new ones opened up. It happened all the time.

This is what he knew as a scientist.

But as a man he couldn't get past the idea that the cave was a tomb.

Kenneger and Beeman were still staring at the specimen, each in their own respective ways. Kenneger had that crooked little smile on his face which was about as friendly as a knife cut. And Beeman's lips were trembling, sometimes pulling away from his teeth. His eyes were huge, black, and glistening. They did not blink.

In that blue glow, his face had the pallor of a corpse. "Somebody . . . somebody ought to take that damn thing and drop it in the deepest crevasse he can find. You know? We're just better off not looking at it, not seeing it, not . . . knowing about it or having it know about us."

Dryden was waiting for some inappropriate comment from Kenneger, but it never came.

The three of them just stood there, faces lit green, breath puffing out in white clouds while the thing before them looked at them from its block of clear blue ice and the glacier cracked and popped, bits of ice dropping from the walls and ceiling.

Dryden had been avoiding looking at the thing in the ice, but now his eyes swam back in its direction. And it was like he had no real choice in the matter. *Look at it,* he thought then. *It's not some harmless fossil or curious relic whose threat has been nullified by death and the passage of eons. There's something very vital about it as if it's just sleeping, waiting to wake up. That's unscientific as hell. But you know it. You feel it. There's life in that thing, vitality, a disturbing sense of awareness. And anybody who looks upon it feels the same way. That thing has a dire effect on the human mind and that's because it is an evil thing from an evil race.*

He knew he should cover it back up with the tarp, but he couldn't seem to move. Almost as if he were paralyzed. So he just looked and felt his blood run cold in his veins. He was no biologist; he could not classify the thing. Stone was a biologist, but his thing was microbes so he didn't even attempt the job. But who really could? In its casket of ice, the creature stood maybe seven feet tall. Its body was gray and leathery-looking, rounded like a barrel and tapering at each end. It had legs on the bottom . . . or something *like* legs, walking appendages anyway . . . that looked more like coiling serpents. It had wings, too, that were accordioned to either side.

How did you classify something like that?

It was alien, unnatural.

It had a head, too. Up on top, a bloated knob of a head with five fleshy projections that looked like writhing worms with an eye at the end of each that was the lurid purple-red of bloodclots and obscenely translucent. Those eyes were the things that got you. That stared holes right through you and made something inside you run like hot wax. To Dryden, they looked very much like the bulbs of flowers opening from wrinkled sockets.

"And you want to thaw it out?" Beeman said, directing those eyes, those awful wrath-filled eyes on Dryden now. Gesturing at him with his blue-

chromed ice-axe. "You and these fucking eggheads want to thaw this . . . this goddamn *atrocity* like a steak on a plate? Oh, now that's good. That's all I need to know about science and scientists. That really takes the cake."

"We're not thawing it, Lieutenant-Commander. Not here."

Beeman trembled, shivered, his face corded and tense. "Well, that's good, Doc, that's real good. Because, see, I won't allow it. You melt that thing out and I'll soak it with gasoline and burn it. I swear to God, I will. I won't have that fucking thing running around down here, doing God knows what." He was being irrational, but nobody dared mention the fact. His eyes were filled with a stupid, mad hatred and nobody wanted to be on the receiving end of it. "Ugly fucking thing. I know what it's about. I know what it wants and I'm not going to let it have it. Understand?"

Kenneger grinned. "But that's why we're here, Commander."

"You're here for the glacier! To study the Emperor! That's what I was told!"

"You were lied to," Kenneger told him without a drop of sympathy in his voice. "We were all lied to right from the start. But, you see, the rest of us *knew* it was a ruse. We knew they wanted one of these things and would stop at nothing to get one–"

"Kenneger . . ." Dryden said.

"Because that was the purpose, Commander. To get one of these creatures. To thaw it. To let it live again. To unleash it here in these caves in the utter isolation of the Beardmore with only the eight of us here. Only eight lives. Not too much to ask to harvest the secrets of the stars themselves, eh?"

Beeman fumed.

"In science, we call that a *controlled experiment.* The isolation provides a sterile environment with no risk of contamination from outside factors." Kenneger laughed. "Lab rats. We're just lab rats."

Dryden didn't bother trying to disagree with Kenneger.

Because essentially, he was right.

That's what it was about.

That's what it had always been about.

Dryden was no fool. God knows he'd heard things through private channels. That the whole Kharkov business was not a fiction but a fact. That they had uncovered some of these things and the entire crew, save two, died as a result. The NSF knew what was going on down here just as it knew that these things were behind it.

One of Dryden's colleagues who had spent two summers at a remote field camp at the foot of the Mulock Glacier said the early expeditions to Antarctica—and the Transantarctic mountains in particular—had whispered about these things and that during Operation Highjump in the 1940's, they had secured several frozen corpses from mountain caves which were still locked away at secure cold storage facilities.

Why perpetuate the bullshit machine?

Kenneger was telling the truth.

Paxton and Reese had come out of one of the crevices now, were staring at Beeman.

"I've had nightmares ever since I looked at it," Dryden confided.

"You're not the only one," Paxton said. "We're all having 'em."

Dryden swallowed. "Let's just cover it back up. I plan on keeping it frozen. At least until spring."

Beeman was staring at him. "Yeah, Doc? Well, maybe the thing has other plans. You ever consider that? You ever consider it might be–"

"Alive?" Kenneger said. "Yes, of course, Commander. Because it *is* alive. Look at it. Look at it and tell me it's not. Maybe not alive as we understand such things, but certainly capable of living again. And it's aware. It's looking at us. It's looking right at us and thinking about us. Can't you feel it–"

At that moment, whatever was bubbling in Beeman ever since he set eyes on the thing just boiled right over. His eyes went bright and savage. His mouth hooked into a snarl and he made a guttural, growling sound that did not even sound remotely human.

He charged right at Kenneger, the ice-axe raised to strike.

Kenneger had time to cover his face and that was about it.

But the axe never descended.

Beeman was seeing the thing in the ice and nothing else, driven by a relentless and instinctual hatred. He knocked Kenneger on his ass and went right over him and right at the frozen thing. And then the axe was rising and falling as it bit into the block of ice, chips and chunks spraying as the blade cut into the block and he tried to get at what was inside.

Paxton and Reese charged in, taking hold of him and he almost casually threw them to the ice.

And when they were down, he stood above them with the axe raised to strike . . . then he tossed it away, covered his face with his hands and collapsed. His eyes rolled back white and that was it.

Dryden quickly covered the thing up with the tarp.

"Jesus," Reese said. "Did you see that?"

"He won't be the last," Kenneger said. "It'll get to all of us like that."

And Dryden knew he was right.

10

POLAR CLIME STATION
MARCH 13

COYLE WAS IN THE Galley, listening to the wind shake the dome and pouring liquid eggs into an industrial-sized bowl. Standing there with a whisk in his hand that wasn't much smaller than a baseball bat, Frye came in with Gut, both suited up in their ECWs from a brisk morning of plowing the roads and snowblowing the drifted walkways. Not true snow, just drift that blew around daily making a mess of things. True snowstorms weren't as common as most thought in Antarctica. Mostly the snow was old snow. But now and again, a good storm could get born at sea or up in the mountains and bury the stations in a matter of hours.

Frye had something he wanted to tell Coyle, but Gut was hanging around and he wasn't going to say it in front of her.

She had to fill them in on the woes of her daughter Trixie's life back in Ohio. She'd finally filed for divorce from the scumbag she'd been married to, a carnie who'd quit the circuit and decided Welfare was a better way to make an honest living.

"That sonofabitch, good riddance, I say," Gut told them, the snow and frost melting from her Carhartt coveralls in the warmth of the Galley. "I got a precious grandchild from that union, but that was all. He shit on my Trixie like she had a toilet ring around her neck. He's not family no more. Nothing but a sperm donor and that's all. Good riddance. If I was back home, I'd be bouncing his fucking head off my knee. Screwing around with Janice Aberly, the mother of Trixie's best friend yet. Good God, they can all be thankful I'm not there to set things right. I'd skull-fuck that smarmy little shit for doing that to my Trixie. I'd shit in his mouth and make him chew it. That sonofabitch."

Gut went on her way to tell Gwen and Zoot about it, over at the table towards the rear of the dining area where the Coven generally held court over Coyle's cooking. Gut was okay. If you liked 'em big and masculine with hair on their chest and a bulge in their pants, then she was your kind of girl.

"I was on the radio with Art Fisher again," Frye said.

Art was his buddy at Pole Station. The antique car buff.

"Yeah?"

Frye narrowed his eyes, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Art was saying things . . . couldn't go into detail, not over the air . . . but I guess there's something brewing up at the Emperor Project."

That was Dr. Dryden's deep-field project, the glaciology study of some ice caves up on the Beardmore Glacier. One of those winter field operations that had a lot of people spooked.

"I'll bet there is."

"Don't know what exactly, Nicky," Frye admitted, "but there's some weird radio traffic coming out of there. That's about all Art would say. He kind of hinted around at it. Some FUBAR shit coming down. DeFleur, that beaker that's running Pole this year, is monitoring communications so that's all I could get. For now."

"Anything else?"

"Some beaker at McMurdo stabbed a guy, said he was a witch or something."

Coyle looked over at Frye. "Remember what you said? If something's happening, we'll start seeing the signs. Well, I'm seeing 'em everywhere."

"About what I was figuring, Nicky."

Ida looked over the top of her *Soap Opera Digest* and stared at the both of them. "What're you two boys whispering about over there? You're like a couple girls telling secrets."

Coyle found that he simply could not fashion a lie, but Frye rose to the occasion. "We're talking about you, Ida. Trying to decide which of us gets to have sex with you first."

She laughed. “Hell, don’t argue about that, boys. There’s plenty for both. Just hurry on and get to it, I’m not getting any younger here. Shit, it’s been so long I think my cherry grew back.”

Good old Ida.

She went back to her magazine, trying to ferret out the intrigue back in Port Charles.

“You figuring we should do something here, Nicky? Or just sit on our hands and watch it go by?”

Coyle shook his head. “No, don’t do anything and don’t say anything. There’s too much shit right now. These people are already wrapped tight. Don’t say anything about this unless it’s to me. We’ll wait and see what happens next.”

Frye scratched his graying beard. “I’m thinking that won’t be long in coming, old boy.”

And he was right.

11

B-142, THE DISPENSARY,
MCMURDO STATION

DR. MUNSE MADE IT his business to stop by on a regular basis since Polchek was put under sedation the day before, raving about witches and God knows what.

Poor man.

Brilliant, but deluded.

It happened sometimes.

"He's been quiet, withdrawn," the medic on duty, Sanbourne said.

Munse went over to him, expecting to see him sleeping.

But Polchek was awake.

He was smiling and his eyes were black and glistening like wet pavement. A chill rolled through Munse as he took one faltering step backward.

Thumping sounds came from the floor.

Scraping noises issued from the walls like claws were dragged over them.

The air temperature dropped and Polchek sat up, steam rolling from him.

His restraints snapped one after the other.

What in the hell is this?

Munse stood there with his mouth hanging open, feeling the energy build in the air like lightning was about to strike. It progressed until he could feel it crawling over the backs of his hands and down his spine and the entire room vibrated and shook.

And Polchek, round and sandy-haired and once quite harmless, looked out at him with those black alien eyes and you could see haunted, cosmic depths in them.

"What's going on here?" Sandbourne said.

The ancient hive has come out of dormancy . . .

Polchek stood up and there was a sharp crackling of energy and he directed it right at Sandbourne. An invisible wave of irresistible force hit him, lifting him up and throwing him ten feet. Right into the door. He hit it so hard he put a crack in it.

Munse didn't get a chance to do anything but gasp. Then that same wave of force slammed him into the wall and he dropped senselessly to the floor.

Polchek was floating three inches off the floor.

Munse stared at him, wordlessly.

They don't need to possess us, we'll possess ourselves.

Impossibly pale, eyes black and kinetic, Polchek's arms were held out straight to either side like Jesus on the cross. Then he drifted to the floor, his face twisting into an agonized mask. He made a gulping/gagging sound and collapsed.

The raging phenomena in the room died out.

After a moment of stunned silence, Sandbourne went over to him.

Hesitantly, he put his hands on him.

Polchek's flesh was moist and hot. Blood filled his eyes and splashed down his face. It was coming out of his ears, too. Sandbourne frantically searched for a pulse, but he knew the verdict even then. Polchek had suffered an embolism or aneurysm in the brain that had burst.

"He's dead," Sandbourne said. "What . . . what in the hell just happened?"

"He was activated," Munse said in a dry voice. "Soon it'll happen to all of us."

12

EMPEROR ICE CAVE

IT HAD TAKEN DRYDEN, Paxton, Reese, and Warren to get Beeman back up the passage after he collapsed. They could have left him in the Polar Haven where Dryden and the others were staying most of the time, but Dryden felt it important to get him out of the cavern and away from the specimen.

And everyone had to agree with that.

They got him up to the Hypertat and put him in his bunk. He was barely lucid through it all and Stone, who was a trained medic, gave him a shot to put him out for awhile. Then they went back below to the cavern and that left Warren and Biggs alone with a crazy man.

"Just call us if he causes trouble," Dryden said. "He should sleep for hours, though. I think he'll be more reasonable when he comes around."

Sure.

That was yesterday. Beeman had woken for a few minutes here and there, that shocked and glassy look in his eyes, and once he'd used the head, but other than that he just slept.

Warren didn't even want to look over at Biggs.

Didn't want to see that look on his face, that sour and knowing I-told-you-so look that was probably going to be a permanent fixture until spring. Biggs had told him not to go down there, not to look at that thing because nothing good would come of it. And he warned him not to bring Beeman down there because Beeman wasn't right in the head to begin with and what was down there would really fuck the old boy up.

So Warren did not look at Biggs.

He sat there on his bunk, feeling so loose inside he thought he might unravel. He watched Beeman sleep and tried not to think about what he'd

seen in that ice yesterday or how far away spring was or how goddamned remote they were up on the Beardmore. Jesus, the closest occupied camps were Polar Clime and Colony and they might as well have been in Des Moines for all the good it did.

Winter.

Yes, they had told him when he volunteered for the project that this was not a summer Antarctic camp. This was an ice cave in a glacier in the Transantarctic Mountains. Compared to this, Siberia was like downtown Chicago. This was the end of the world, man, or . . . more precisely . . . the *bottom* of it.

In Arlington, the NSF guy at the Office of Polar Programs had put it to him like this: *We're talking dead winter here, son. If you don't think you can hack it, don't do it. The isolation, the extreme environment . . . it can get to a guy. You boys will have everything you need and back-up systems to the point of redundancy to keep you alive. But if anything happens, you're on your own. Think about it before you sign, okay? I was you, I wouldn't want any part of it. We're talking an ice cave up on the Beardmore Glacier. That place is desolate at midsummer with the planes flying. But at dead winter . . . God, I hate to even think what it might be like down there with the cold and darkness . . .*

But Warren had signed.

And now he was marooned here.

With Biggs and a crazy man and something they'd chopped out of the ice that he did not want to think about. He knew what it was, all right, but sometimes it was easier if you didn't admit things. Even to yourself. Didn't put a name to them.

So he stared at Beeman.

He forgot about X-Box.

The winter was endless and whether they'd be alive or sane come spring was anyone's guess. He looked up and Biggs was staring at him.

"What? What?"

Biggs just shook his head. "I told you, man. But you just wouldn't listen."

"I've been waiting for this."

"That thing's down there. And now this whole goddamn place is haunted and we're haunted with it," he said. "How does it feel, Warren? How does it feel to be a fucking haunted house?"

Warren just looked away, thought he might start balling.

Yes, how *did* it feel?

He didn't know, but he felt he would and soon. For down here, things were going to happen. Terrible things. The monsters were loose now and there was no getting around that. Even now he could feel a subtle and negative shift in the atmosphere of the Emperor. Something was happening. That thing down there was awake, filling the cave with its virulent memories and he could feel them flooding his world like poison.

Haunted? God yes, he was haunted.

13

COLONY STATION

IN THE DARKNESS OF his cell, Slim was not alone.

He was never alone. Not really. If he shut his eyes very tightly, sometimes he could pretend that he was alone. But even in his mind there was no such thing as solitude. There really had not been for some time now, but it had gotten worse since he was brought to Colony.

He did not remember how he had gotten to Colony.

He only had a distorted, sketchy idea of what his life was like before. But he did know it had gotten worse. There had been some kind of crash a long time ago. A plane? A helicopter? He wasn't sure. He had been there with other men and seen something under a tarp. Something that had also seen *him,* even though it was quite dead in the biological sense of the term.

That had started it.

That was the seed that had slowly blossomed into his secret garden of dread and horror and insanity. There had been dreams and visions, weird compulsions . . . and faces, faces of people he should know but could not honestly remember. It was all so blurry. The only thing he really understood now was this place.

His cell.

The dark.

And Dr. Relling, of course. Her staff. The men and women in the white coats that strapped him to tables and injected him with things, sometimes dunked him into tanks of warm fluid . . . always asking him questions and making him tell them the things he saw.

They wanted to know about the floating place that was a place in-between places, a dreamworld where there was no up or down or left or right . . . just drifting matter and shapes and the things, those awful things

that liked to play in his mind. It was different there. You could not touch things, you could not feel them. Everything was like smoke. Objects or things like objects could pass right through one another.

It had been like that for Slim.

While he drifted there in the ether, he had become disjointed . . . his atoms had refused to stay together. His arms floated away. His head detached itself from his body. Though he was not connected, he could move his severed, floating limbs. And when he screamed, it had come not from his mouth but from a place far, far away.

These are the things Dr. Relling's people wanted to know about.

They wanted to know about the things, the Old Ones, the Elder Things, though the creatures did not call themselves this. The word they used could not be translated properly from those buzzing voices and piping cries.

Relling's white-coated techies wanted to know where the Old Ones had come from originally. They wanted to know how they passed from this world to others. How they moved through solid matter and why when they died, their minds remained intact, bodiless and spectral, but alive and organized.

But Slim would not tell them.

The Old Ones told him things he would not dare repeat. They told him a lot about the physics and mathematics that made these things possible. Slim had screamed when they got in his mind with their cold, slimy thoughts and made him see what they saw and feel what they felt and understand as they understood. That had been traumatizing . . . but he had survived it.

The Old Ones told him he would.

That one day he would be like them and *of* them. But he must not tell Relling what he knew, for it was not time for Relling to know these things.

Slim had purged it all from his mind, refused to remember it.

Then that day Relling strapped him down and injected that drug into him . . . then he *had* to remember. And when he remembered, the Old Ones had touched him again. Mostly the undead ones that had no bodies. Relling had wanted to know about the hive, about the million eyes, and the undead ones did not want her to know...they had come through the walls and

everything sank in a blue mist...things shook and trembled and crashed. Those minds that were not individual but like cells of the same awesome brain could have crushed Relling and the station, but they did not.

They enjoyed watching men learn about themselves.

They enjoyed how men arrived at the truth.

But since that day, Slim had not really been Slim. He was not part of the hive, though he had been touched by it and immersed in it and you could never be whole again after that happened. The Old Ones revolted him . . . yet, he understood them as an imprisoned man understood his jailers. They did what they did because it was part of their blueprint for the world.

But Relling?

Relling was worse.

Relling was human and she was the first to betray her own race. To Slim that made her even more revolting, something unpleasant and squirming that needed to be crushed.

Now Slim was alone in the dark cell where Relling kept him.

There was no light, no sound. Even the floor and walls were seamless and untextured. There was absolutely no sensory stimuli. Relling called this sensory deprivation. *When you are not distracted by what is outside, you will embrace what is inside and set it free.*

Yes, he was alone in the cell.

The others were near, the Old Ones, but they preferred to watch and keep silent. So without them crowding his mind and unlocking things in there, Slim was remembering things. Maybe they were dreams and maybe they were reality. There seemed little difference between the two now.

He could see a woman, a pretty young woman with spiky bright red hair. She was holding hands with a little girl. Slim knew he was with them. They were walking through the forest and the little girl had a stick she said was her wand. She could wave the wand, she said, and make magic stars fall from the sky... one, two, three. The woman laughed and Slim laughed and the little girl said she wanted to go with him to the cold place, to the North Pole, but he told her it wasn't the North Pole, it was the South Pole and–

Oh my God–

(rachel?)

Is that you?

(rachel . . . rachel???)

I remember, I remember–

No . . . NO . . . DON'T TAKE THEM TAKE THEM AWAY FROM MEEEE–

A fluidic, warm gush filled his mind, blotting it all out and he knew it was the Old Ones not wanting him to think about these things. But just before it was blotted out—washed away, it seemed, like an eraser wiping away something scribbled on a blackboard—there had been something there, something strong and real and it brought joy and pain and . . . and he wasn't sure what, only that it was a seamless purity that they had taken from him.

They were coming closer now.

Oh, please don't touch me, don't touch me, not again, not again.

He knew it was not the ghosts, not the undead ones, but the living Old Ones.

They were getting close to him now.

His brain flared with pain and he cried out. They could touch you gently, harmlessly . . . but sometimes they could give you an electric shock or their tendrils would be so hot or so cold they would burn you.

He could hear the rustling of their wings and the rubbery sound of their triangular footpads on the floor, the slithering of their limbs. And that sharp, gagging odor that oozed from them.

They began to speak to him in those buzzing voices that hurt just to hear. Yes, yes, yes, he would do what they wanted. He would kill himself if they asked it, just please, please–

Not the pain, not the pain, not the pain . . .

They were shadows around him.

Shadows that walked through the walls, became solid once they passed through, but were still shadows. Clustering, alien, eldritch shadows that were alive and viscid and breathing. He could hear the leathery fluttering of

their wings, the scraping sound of their limbs. Yes, they were moving around him in a shadow-show of shapes and distortion, a whirling dry-hot wind, a howling vortex of wings and eyes and reaching tendrils and Slim began to shriek in his mind, *I haven't said anything to anyone. . . they want to know, Relling and the others want to know, but I . . . WON'T . . . TELL . . . THEM . . .*

He was standing now and he did not remember standing up, but he was. They had circled around him, pressing in from all sides, things that brought a darkness much darker than that of the cell. It was a darkness you could feel and know and shrink from.

They were touching him.

Coiling tendril-fingers.

The touch of snakes.

Crawling snakes . . . burning, oily, constricting.

And the eyes . . . those red, red eyes looking at him and into him, alive and electric and disembodied, peeling back the layers of his psyche and his soul as carefully as scalpels, exposing the red, moist meat beneath. They were feeding on his memories, unwrapping the layers of his soul's onion skin wrapping and feeding on what was beneath, touching it, sorting through it, filling it with themselves, creeping through his intimate and secret places like worms tunneling through meat–

And then they pulled back as he fainted, fell into one of them and those smooth, cold-hot limbs stood him back up. He was shaking and moaning, divorced now of anything he had been before, his memories chewed away and swallowed by them.

He felt sickened.

Violated.

Filled with a psychic horror and a physical aversion for them.

He closed his eyes, telling himself they were not there, but those tentacle-like limbs grabbed him and held him, icy cold and dripping with vile, acrid secretions. Their minds would not be denied and although all was darkness, their eyes were lit brightly, a cutting incandescent red that burned away Slim's vision and freewill. Those minds were coming back again, like

sharks that bit into a swimmer, letting the blood flow sweet and hot, returning later for a feast of meat and fat and limb—

—slithering in through his own eyes like fat-bodied, undulantserpents, musky and repellent. Wriggling in his brain, biting and chewing, nesting in the shadowy places of his stillborn psyche, laying their steaming eggs and infesting him with their young that even now hatched in hot, writhing loops, infecting and contaminating, breeding noxious life and filling him with themselves until he was submerged in them.

Sunk in a green, viscous sea, drowning in the pestilent immensity of the hive itself–

And as everything in his mind was clear-cut, poisoned, and ripped out in juicy, bloody handfuls, he could hear his voice screaming, screaming against the droning central mind of them all: *My name is Slim, my name is Slim . . . Glen, Glen, Glen Ardozio! I'm not part of you! I'm not part of what you are! You can't have me! You can't own me! I am! I am! I am! I AM ME AND YOU CANNOT DO THIS YOU CANNOT OWN WHAT I AM AM AM–*

And then later, when Slim broke the surface of that particularly stagnant and polluted pond, he opened his eyes and he was alone. He did not reel from what a sane mind might have considered psychic gang-rape, he just sat there in the dark.

And slowly, slowly, a rather grotesque and obscene grin spread over his lips, rising to the surface of what he now was . . . a white, gas-filled cadaver breaking the surface of a black lake.

14

POLAR CLIME STATION

WHEN COYLE OPENED THE door, rubbing sleep from his eyes, Gwen was standing there. But it was not the usual Gwen showing up with a bottle of wine and a sultry look in her eye. This Gwen was stressed and scared and balancing precariously on the edge. "C'mon, Nicky! Get your ass over to the CosRay Lab right now," she said, nearly out of breath, something beneath her words scratching like rusted iron. "There's something weird going on!"

"What?"

But she had already run off.

He pulled on his clothes and flattened down his hair with his hand, pulling on his boots and parka. He hit the corridor running, something going tight inside him.

The CosRay Lab was officially the Neutrino/Cosmic Ray Observatory and you got there by following a tunnel from the dome that ran nearly a hundred feet. Cryderman and Danny Shin were playing a board game in the Community Room as he ran by, Battleship, and he breezed right past them.

"Hey, Nicky?" Cryderman called out. "Where's the fire, man?"

Coyle jogged down D-corridor that housed the Biolab and Geolab and Coring Lab, all the assorted tech rooms where the beakers played. Then he was through the door and into the tunnel itself which was not heated and it was like jumping into a mountain lake in January when the cold hit him and wrapped him up. At the end of the tunnel, leaning against electrical conduits that led from the dome, Gwen was waiting.

"C'mon, Nicky," she said. "This is weird shit."

He followed her retreating form through the door and felt something pass through him right away, like some weird static charge that made the

hairs stand up on the back of his neck. A wave of terror and despair rolled through him and it nearly flattened him with its impact. It was there and then gone. But what it left was an anxiety that was crushing.

The CosRay building was sectioned off into a half dozen smaller rooms that surrounded the observatory room itself, most of them filled with spare parts and assorted junk. The observatory equipment was automated and the only person that ever went there was Eicke to download the data onto disk.

The neutron detectors themselves were originally developed to monitor radiation at nuclear power plants, but here they served as cosmic ray monitors. Cosmic rays hit the Earth's upper atmosphere at roughly the speed of light and were broken down into subatomic particles. The CosRay detectors were sensitive only to the neutrons and by counting the neutron saturation, solar activity could be monitored. Not all the cosmic rays came from our sun; some were from distant supernovas and superjets in the centers of faraway galaxies. The computers could track their trajectories with amazing precision.

Coyle made his way through the maze of rooms and stopped in a short hallway outside the observatory room. Eicke was standing there in his red parka, his eyes magnified by his thick-lensed glasses. Though he was round and white-bearded, he was hardly jolly.

Gwen was with him.

Though it was against regulations, she was smoking a cigarette and nobody was telling her not to.

"I don't know about this business," Eicke said, seeming confused. "I don't know about it at all."

Coyle was about to ask what the hell this was about yet again, but then that sense of terror spread through him again and gooseflesh raced down his arms.

A vibration, or a series of them, rose up and the observatory shook, actually *shook*. It was like standing inside some idling machine. The vibrations came and went, some so violent that he did not think he would be able to stay on his feet.

Eicke flattened himself against the wall like he might get thrown and Gwen just tensed up. Coyle felt a slow and drumming headache spiraling to life in the back of his head. He could smell a sharp, acrid stink and the air around him began to crackle with electricity. Sounds began echoing: metallic squeals and screeching, shrill piping and low pings. The lights flickered.

And then it just ended.

Breathing hard, his entire body shaking, Coyle said, "What the fuck was that?"

Eicke just shook his head, his eyes squeezed tight and drool ran from his mouth.

Gwen used both hands to steady her cigarette, pulled off it. "In there," she said. "There's a woman in there . . . at least I think it's a woman."

An icy wind circling his heart, Coyle stepped into the observatory room.

It was fairly large with its banks of neutron detectors and data acquisition systems and boron gas tubing. Papers and files and flow charts had been scattered around like a good wind had raged through there. He was immediately reminded of the state of Slim's room. He stepped around workstations and equipment, the air fouled with an unpleasant chemical odor. Curled up against the wall, knees pulled up to chin, was a woman that was rocking back and forth with a slow cadence. She was naked.

Coyle was speechless.

He figured she was in her mid-thirties. She was thin and long-limbed, small-breasted, her hair dark and mussed hanging over her face, but other than that he really couldn't say. Her entire body was glistening with some transparent slime like afterbirth. When he took a step forward, she flinched and a slight vibration oscillated through the floor.

He stepped back.

That chemical odor was coming off of her, hot and caustic.

It made his eyes water.

The temperature in the observatory was a mean fifty degrees and she should have been shaking, but she was not. On the contrary a feverish heat rolled off her in waves.

Her legs were pulled up, arms encircling them, her face buried in the valley between her knees. She had not looked up as yet.

Gwen entered the room, but stayed in the doorway.

Instantly, the vibrations rose up and Coyle felt everything inside him clamp down tight. The floor vibrated and the walls shook. The lights flickered. There was a nauseating stench of ozone permeating the air. He heard . . . wild, screeching sounds and scratching noises coming from behind him, overhead, everywhere. Then they died away.

"What the hell's going on, Nicky?" Gwen asked him.

"I don't know." Breathing in and out, he let himself relax. He noticed with some unease that there were puncture marks in the woman's arms and legs, a network of pale pink scars at her temples.

"Miss? Miss? Can you hear me? My name's Coyle, Nicky Coyle. I work here at Polar Clime Station–"

She lifted her head and he saw her face.

He had a mad impulse to scream. Her face was contorted with deep-set lines, her eyes bleached completely white, so huge they looked like colorless egg yolks, oozing and slimy. Her mouth was hooked in a waxen grin of defilement. When she spoke, her voice was deep and ruined and lost: *"God will not be the one that calls of thee. For thee is thrice named by the devils of old. Gather in their name and give unto them that which is theirs . . . and theirs alone . . ."*

Coyle just stared, knowing he had heard her speak those words, those same words that had been scrawled or burned into the wall of Slim's room, but doubting it because it could not be. Not only saying those words, but *finishing* them, knowing the parts that were missing.

She couldn't have said that, you idiot. There's no way she could know that.

He thought he was hallucinating.

He felt like he was tripping out on some really good acid.

Reality had pulled back and folded-up, everything seemed incredibly vivid and lucid and all he could do was look at that malefic grinning face and those sightless, blanched eyes. Every inch of his body was creeping. He thought he would pass clean out.

“What the hell did you say?”

She grinned and electricity again crackled in the air.

The vibrations rolled through the room, those distant noises echoed and bounced around. He was hearing things in them . . . things that he could not place . . . weird strident piping sounds and buzzing noises and a hollow, pained wailing that he thought was the sound a grasshopper might make if it screamed.

Gwen cried out and Eicke began to pray out in the corridor.

Papers flew around and charts fell off the walls and a window on the other side of the room fanned out with a silent spiderwebbing of cracks and then shattered, spraying glass and freezing air into the room.

And then it stopped.

All of it.

Gwen was standing there, breathing fast like she was hyperventilating. “What kind of fucking bullshit is this?” she said. “Who the hell is that woman?”

“Her name is Chelsea Butler, I think,” Special Ed said from the doorway. “She was a cosmologist from Mount Hobb Research Station. She is one of the missing.”

The woman looked up at Coyle again and that evil demeanor was gone. Her lips were trembling, her eyes not colorless but a pale shade of green. She was sobbing, her speech breaking up, “I . . . I don’t know what’s . . . happening to me,” she managed. “I don’t know where I’ve been . . . I don’t know who I am . . .”

The air in the observatory was getting practically polar.

Gwen got an emergency thermal blanket and wrapped the woman’s shaking form in it. Cryderman and Shin showed up, gawking. Gwen disappeared and came back with a sheet of plywood. With Coyle and Cryderman’s help, they nailed it up over the broken window.

Hopper showed up next. “My God! What’s going on here? Who’s this woman? Where did she come from? What happened to this place? I want some answers right now! Does anybody have any answers for me?”

“Not a one,” Gwen said. “Eicke found her. I was the first one he found so he brought me in on it. Beyond that I don’t know. But I’m guessing that maybe you should ask your friends at Colony.”

Hopper just looked around like he was searching for some posted protocol that would tell him how you handled things like this.

Coyle had Butler on her feet. “Better get her to Medical,” he said.

She could barely walk, so Coyle scooped her up in the blanket and carried her through the door. She was unconscious. Her head lolled on her neck like it was broken.

“Maybe you’re right,” he said to Gwen. “Maybe we ought to give Colony a call. They might have a few answers to this because I’m thinking Butler did not walk all the way from Mount Hobb.”

15

OUT AT THE POWER Station, Stokes came awake.

He was pulling his shift, making sure the generators and boilers were purring along. As usual, he'd dozed off in the control booth.

But something had woken him.

A scratching noise.

For reasons even he poorly understood, Stokes did not move. He had the feeling that he was not alone. Somebody was there with him, watching him.

He stepped out of the booth.

#3 Generator was running, rumbling in the background. There were four Caterpillar diesel generators in the Power Station. They ran alternately. While one was running, maintenance could be performed on the others. And if one died, there were three back-ups and an emergency generator in the dome itself.

He moved past the row of generators and into the corridor beyond. Closing the door behind him, shutting off the noise of the generator room, he listened. He could feel the dull beat of his heart.

The station was very, very quiet.

Even outside, the wind did not blow and the walls did not creak. Just an utter black, silent pall that consumed Polar Clime both inside and outside. He kept listening for the sounds, but there were nothing.

A manic fear suddenly enveloped him that the station was deserted.

The others were gone and he was alone.

Alone.

That was ridiculous. It was only a five minute walk to the dome. He could've got on the radio and chatted with Cryderman or Harv at the T-Shack. Yet, he had never felt so isolated . . . or vulnerable . . . before.

He took a deep breath. The Power Station was a large pre-fab building with the generator room serving as its hub. There were also parts rooms, boilers rooms, a couple offices that were not used in the winter. A circular corridor wound around the entire structure.

Nothing had changed.

That sound again.

Scratch, scratch, scratch.

"Like rats in the walls," he said under his breath.

No, no rats in Antarctica.

Listen.

Something was there.

And it was coming.

It was coming down the corridor: something huge and coarse and evil. It made a wet, hissing sound as it breathed. Whenever it paused, sniffing for him like an autumn hound anxious for mallard, things dripped from it, splatting and plopping.

You're fucking losing it, man.

He turned on the lights and walked the length of the corridor, circling around the Power Station. Nothing and nobody. He walked into the boiler room, checked displays and gauges, studied the intricate network of ducts and steam piping.

A thumping noise.

Up there, it's up there.

About twenty feet up, there were walkways so the piping could be maintained. But there couldn't be anyone up there. Not this time of night.

Yet, he could hear something up there.

Something searching about, scratching and scraping, skittering up there with feet that sounded like tapping pencils. Even with the lights on, there were shadows. The piping blocked it from his view.

Swallowing, knowing he had to get his feet under him, he called out. "Who's up there?"

Silence.

Then . . . yes, a hissing and dripping noise followed by a chitinous sound as of a grasshopper rubbing its spurred forelimbs together.

(remember)

And in his mind, Stokes could see it: something black and malefic and bristling, something that oozed with slime and carried itself about on a thousand skittering legs.

(do you remember?)

And he did. God, yes, he *did* remember. When he was a kid there was a deserted house: boxy, windowless, plain. It had been abandoned easily thirty years and was gray, weathered, leaning. When the wind blew it creaked.

It was not a good place.

Not at night.

For when you passed it, you ran. All the children did. You looked straight ahead and you ran. You did not pause, you did not look at it because you might see something looking back. Something hunched and red-eyed and claw-fingered, something that would be on you in the span of heartbeat, something that would drag you across those rotting floors and tuck you in some mildewed room where it could work on you in secret, gorging itself on your boy-blood and boy-flesh, drunk on the sweet milk of your terror.

All the kids had been afraid of that house.

Stokes had been more afraid than most.

And now here . . . at the bottom of the world, the thing had finally tracked him down.

With a vague dream-sense of reality, he wondered how many children it had eaten through the years. Maybe all those kids they used to put on milk cartons had been its victims.

Yes, yes . . .

How many had it lured into that deserted, shadow-riven tomb of a house with a seduction of sweets and fairy-tale spooks, all the while hiding its true face, squatting in darkness, hidden away in mildewy, webby places, waiting to strike? Waiting to show its immense swollen form, its many legs and bleeding

mouths and myriad corpse-yellow eyes, finally slithering from some dark crevice or moldering attic breezeway or cellar damp like a midnight spookshow haunt from a magician's dark trunk . . . and catching its prey.

Its soft, pink, young prey.

Holding them down with its slimy, hairy bulk, stinking of marsh gas and rotting leaves, gorging on fear and tinny child-screams, its many mouths filled with gleaming surgical needles and venom-dripping pins.

And then . . . yes, opening those warm bags of goodies, piercing and impaling, chewing and sucking, leaving nothing but tiny broken Halloween skeletons and flaps of flesh that it would stitch and sew into ragged garments of boy-skin and girl-skin with all those needles sharpened on child-bones–

Trembling and sweating, Stokes tried to clear his mind.

This was insane. He was still dreaming. None of this was real.

Yet . . . it was.

Get a grip. It's only in your head. This is only dangerous if you believe in it, if you let yourself believe.

But did the beast really require his belief any more than a hatchet required belief to chop off a head or a bullet to punch through a skull? Yes . . . no . . . maybe.

The more you believe, the ten-year old inside told him, *the stronger it is.*

All children knew that and all adults pretended it wasn't so. The more he feared, the more dangerous it was. His belief sharpened the blade of the hatchet that chopped off his head and his belief was the gunpowder that expelled the bullet that drilled through his skull.

But he was afraid.

And it was real.

And it knew where he was.

It waited up there, hissing and dripping, its stomachs—because, yes, it had many of them—growling at the idea of what it would soon devour. Like a hungry man awaiting a savory meal, it relished each moment, grinding its teeth and stroking its swollen belly, its yellow eyes bright and malignant. It

was coming down the stairs now, its many legs bicycling and scratching against the iron steps.

Sweating and shivering, hot and cold and lukewarm, Stokes opened his mouth to scream but all that came out was a squeaky rasp. He was paralyzed. He fought to get some feeling into his limbs, some blood into his muscles, but was rewarded only with a dull tingling in his extremities.

The thing would have him.

He could see it now.

It was black and shaggy and leggy as it came for him. Not a spider, really, but a spider-thing, a spider-horror whose body was not that of an arachnid, but only looked like one. It was huge, its bloated body made of the bony husks of dozens and dozens of dead, leeched children. Its legs were the narrow bone lattices of child-skeletons wound in dirty silk and glued together with spider-spit; its underbelly composed of fleshless faces that chattered their teeth and screamed.

Poised above him, all those mouths open and chattering, needle-teeth ready for the undoing of him, he could smell the green, dank tidal rot of its breath.

"Stokes," a voice said.

He looked and saw someone standing in the doorway to the boiler room. At first he thought it was Gwen Curie . . . then he was certain it was Zoot and then maybe Cassie Malone. But it was not them. It was another woman . . . her image almost filmy, face grave-pale, eyes a luminous yellow.

"Quick, Stokes! Before it gets you!" she said and there was something strange about her voice . . . it sounded so desperate, almost hungry. *"Come on! We'll hide! It won't find us!"*

Though he knew it was wrong, as everything was wrong, he ran to her and she took his hand in her own which was flabby and warm. She pulled him down the corridor, into a supply room. Shut the door.

"What–" he began.

"Sssshhh! It'll hear you . . ."

He crouched in the darkness, the woman huddled behind him. A high, disturbing smell wafted from her . . . fermenting, hot . . . like a basket of

plums left to rot in some dark, moist place.

"It's going to be okay now," she promised him in a throaty whisper. *"Just you and me . . ."*

He could not hear the beast.

He could only hear the wet smacking sound of the woman licking her lips.

The ragged, phlegmy noise of her breathing.

Only a nightlight dispelled the darkness. Stokes could see his shadow on the wall and that of the woman behind him . . . he watched as it rose up into some twisted, grotesque shape, hair slithering like snakes.

That's when he realized he'd been fooled.

The woman laughed with secret mirth.

And Stokes screamed for no more than a second before her teeth ripped out his throat and she bathed in his blood.

16

MARCH 14

MORNING.

You could call it that all you wanted, of course, but morning was a conceptual term at best once winter began.

The wind had come in the night, at times little more than a mournful whisper and at others, the bellow of a typhoon, blowing snow in four- and five-foot drifts, packing it in a white, seamless barrier around the dome of Polar Clime, inundating outbuildings and Jamesways and turning little fish huts and warm-up shacks to sand dunes whose black flags flapped in the breeze.

Coyle was up early because when you were a cook that's just the way it was. When others relaxed, you worked. He rolled out of bed, listening to the perpetual hum of his humidifier. He stared at the tapestry of frost that lay over the walls, just thinking, thinking. Letting it all come back to him, all the bad stuff that had become a reality this year. And when it did, he was thankful for those first few groggy moments when he remembered none of it.

He stood up, feeling the chill coming through the walls. He looked out his icy square of window, rubbed the frost away with his sleeve. The compound was black and drifted, the security lights out there trembling in the wind.

As he made his way to the showers, he could hear the plows out there. Gut and Frye cleaning the night's mess as they did every morning. He could hear people starting to move around in their rooms, grumbling and swearing, ready for another day of living the dream. All seemed pretty ordinary.

But it wasn't.

And he could feel that from the top of his head to the balls of his feet. You worked in stations like Clime long enough, winter or summer, you got used to their particular feel. Summer stations had a crowded, hurried feel like a mall back home. Winters, they were more relaxed, plenty of space, a laid-back feel to it all. And that's how Clime had felt last winter and at the beginning of this season.

But now that had changed.

The atmosphere had been disrupted. And it had been disrupted ever since Mount Hobb lost its people and never had it regained its balance. Now it just felt disjointed, tense, out of sorts as if it did not know *how* to feel. Its muscles were not loose and relaxed, they were tight, expectant, ready for anything, like the station was an animal backed into a corner and ready to leap and draw blood at any moment.

Coyle could feel it in his belly and down his spine . . . that sense of nervous anticipation and barely-concealed dread. It was thick, heavy, almost suffocating.

When he stepped out of the shower and pulled his joggers on, Locke was waiting for him.

"Hey, Nicky," he said, standing there in his Charlotte Hornets windsuit. He was breathing hard. He usually got up before everyone else and jogged the corridors of the dome before starting his day. "I hear we have a stowaway."

"Yeah. She showed up in CosRay last night."

"I hear there was some . . . phenomena happening around her."

"Yeah, you could say that." The gossip had already made the rounds, so there was no point in rehashing it.

"Funny, isn't it? She disappears for two months and shows up here."

"Yeah."

"Did you read that witchcraft book I sent you?"

"Yes. It didn't exactly reassure me."

"It wasn't supposed to."

Locke went on listing all the weird things that had happened starting with Mount Hobb and ending with the mysterious appearance of the woman thought to be Chelsea Butler. And then touching on the phenomena that was now being openly associated with her . . . telepathy, telekinesis. "She's been with *them,* Nicky. They've opened up something in her that they'll soon open up in the rest of us. I don't pretend to know how she ended up here or why, but I will tell you she's dangerous. Remember those people in the book? The ones who were called witches? Keziah Mason of the Arkham Devil-Cult comes to mind. She was not a witch really, yet she was. Something had been opened up in her. She was part of the hive. Butler is a witch, too, my friend. I went over there. She gives me the creeps . . . just staring and staring. She doesn't remember who she is. She might have been Chelsea Butler once, but now she's something else. Does this make sense to you?"

It did, of course. Because that book had pointed him in the same direction. No, those people weren't fairy-tale witches, yet that's exactly what they were. Something even worse.

"She's part of the hive now, Nicky. We're all in danger. That phenomena . . . it will get worse. She wasn't sent here for no reason."

Coyle could not argue any of it because it was true. He knew it. Locke knew it. But even armed with this knowledge . . . what could they possibly do? Drag Butler out into the snow and burn her at the stake? Jesus, regardless of what had happened to her, she was still a human being.

Or was she?

"See, Nicky, all my life I've been seeing patterns and underlying causes to things other people consider either outlandish or simply coincidental. I've learned to believe that if anything seems too coincidental, it's no coincidence. That makes me a conspiracist. So be it. I gave that book to you to further illustrate my point that this stuff has been going on a long time and not just down here, though certainly it's more concentrated in Antarctica. I think others have seen the patterns to this and still others have mostly *refused* to see them. But you and I and everyone down here this year do not have the luxury of self-denial. No more than the people at Kharkov

had. It's real, Nicky. It's happening. The epicenter is down here, but the shockwaves are spreading across the world. Are we together on this?"

Coyle had a manic desire to laugh, but he couldn't. "Yeah, we're together. Same page. Same chapter. Same book. And just so you know, I hate the plot."

"So do I, Nicky, and mainly because I already know the ending." Locke quieted a moment as Harvey came in with his duffel bag, the usual ugly and unhappy look on his face. He grumbled something in passing and Locke did not speak again until the shower was running. "The only question that remains right now, for you and I, is: what in the hell are we going to do about it?"

"I'm wondering that myself."

Locke shrugged. "Think about it. People are talking crazy here . . . the crew is on its last nerve. If something isn't done, I think they'll take matters into their own hands. I think they'll go after Butler." With that, he jogged off.

Coyle just stood there, feeling very weak and hopeless.

Yeah, what *were* they going to do about it?

Now Coyle understood a few things about hysteria and mob violence. Fear could make people do crazy, irrational, and violent things. It could kick up a crazy firestorm of superstition and intolerance. It seemed like an absolutely ridiculous concept that something as barbaric as witch-hysteria could be fanned into being at a modern Antarctic station . . . but he honestly believed that it *could* happen.

Because it was there.

In everyone.

That seed of bigotry and savagery looking for the dire nourishment that would give it full flower. Nobody at Clime was particularly violent or superstitious, but they were isolated and they were frightened and they were paranoid. The raw materials were certainly there. And when you took Butler and everything else and mixed them up in one big, foul-smelling stew then people would stop thinking rationally and start getting ideas. They would see her as the root of all evil and she would be the first scapegoat. And when that happened, when the fire was lit, the Old Ones would be inconsequential . . . for the crew would be their own worst enemies.

With that in mind, he wondered if the aliens had planned it that way as they had planned everything else. But, no, he didn't think so. Wanton, random purges would defeat their purpose. A farmer couldn't have his own livestock deciding which cow would live and which pig would die. No, if what Locke said was true and the world was about to be harvested, there would certainly be purges. But controlled, methodical purges designed to rid the hive of unruly, aberrant minds. For surely there would be some. Not a lot, but enough to cause trouble. Individuals who would essentially be freaks to the Old Ones: independent, free-thinking, those controls planted in their ancestors malfunctioning in them. People who would refuse the siren call of the hive and survive to fight. Dangerous elements that would have to be purged to maintain the fixed identity and global purity of the hive itself. Maybe he was one or Gwen or–

Dear God, enough.

Time to get to work.

17

IN MEDICAL, BOTH GWEN and Zoot were shivering.

The temperature had not just dropped, it had plummeted. The air felt thicker, activated, like it was loaded with charged particles.

And it stank.

Stank with a foul sweetness of decay.

As Gwen sat there, holding Zoot's trembling hand, she was afraid. But more so, she was fascinated because she was seeing something that should have been physically impossible. She wished she had a camcorder right then. Because you could see something like this, but no one would ever believe you. At least, not back in the real world.

With the physical change coming over Butler, the phenomena began.

Things rattled on shelves. There were thumping sounds in the walls. That crackling noise again. Weird pipings and squeals. An odd thrumming vibration in the floor that Gwen could feel right through the balls of her feet. A wind rushed from absolutely nowhere and blew papers from Flagg's desk, only it wasn't cold like the air itself, but hot and gritty like a breath from a crematory oven.

On the bed, Butler sat up.

But she was no longer Butler, but a thing. A hag.

Her face was gray and horribly seamed, her mouth twisted into a malefic grin full of yellow overlapping teeth that were thin as nails. And her eyes, as they looked in Gwen's direction, were like the whites of eggs . . . slimy and colorless, completely lacking pupils. A trickle of inky fluid ran from the corner of her leathery lips. And as they watched, a series of black blood blisters rose up on her face like fleshy bubbles, popping one after the other.

"*They will be named as of old,*" she said. "*All of them.*"

Then she collapsed into a heap.

Gwen and Zoot held each other, chilled in ways they could not begin to fathom.

18

IN THE GALLEY, IDA said, "The Beav's got her tit caught in the wringer, as my ma used to say. All bent out of shape. You know those chickens you had thawing, Nicky? Well, somebody helped themselves to three of them last night. You know The Beav, she counts everything, lives by her inventory. Somebody stole those chickens and she wants to know who. She was swearing a blue streak when she left here ten minutes ago to go crawl up Hopper's ass about it."

Three chickens?

Three raw, uncooked chickens?

Now who in the hell would want three raw chickens? Coyle wondered. The only cooking facilities at Clime outside of a few microwave ovens and a few more Primus stoves in Emergency Supplies were right here in the Galley. Unless, of course, they weren't taken to be eaten. Maybe as a gag or something. But the way things were going these days, nobody was doing much pranking. They just weren't feeling mischievous or playful.

"I wonder who wanted my chickens," he said out loud.

"Hell, who knows?" Ida said. "You know how these idiots are. Probably some kind of theme party coming up. Something to do with chickens or eggs or which came first. Remember last year, Nicky? The Fried Egg Gala? Probably something like that."

And it could have been. It really could have been.

But as zany and out of hand as people got due to boredom at the stations, nobody wasted food. Outside of maybe a few cans of beans, the crews were real careful about that. Wasting food was like stealing from your own refrigerator. Last winter's Fried Egg Gala had been born because some fool at McMurdo had sent Clime two cases of rubber novelty fried eggs. Four-hundred of them. How those things had ended up in Antarctica was anyone's guess. But things like that happened in the spooky world of requisitions. One year at Pole Station, they'd gotten 1200 gross of pink party

balloons and three dozen inflatable six-foot Godzilla figures. Another year at Palmer some joker had sent them twenty, five-foot rolls of clear plastic packing wrap and a hundred bottles of baby oil. The theme parties those years had been simply beyond description.

But raw chickens? Unless somebody was planning on Bacteria Night, it made no sense at all.

"I can't wait to hear what happened to 'em," Ida said.

Coyle couldn't either.

Because as much as he bounced the idea of stolen chickens around in his brain, it simply did not seem to fit. And that worried him. He couldn't honestly fit abducted poultry into the greater whole of the plentiful weirdness that was running rampant at Clime that year . . . yet, something told him that it must, in some way, be connected.

But the idea seemed ludicrous.

Maybe it was some asshole with an axe to grind against The Beav or maybe even him or the Galley staff in general and this was their way of getting back at them. Even that seemed farfetched, but given the petty bullshit of the camp system it was certainly possible.

A mere coincidence.

And as he tried to accept that, Locke's voice echoed in his head: *I've learned to believe that if anything seems too coincidental, it's no coincidence.*

He left Ida to handle breakfast and headed towards Medical.

19

AFTER LOCKE LEFT COYLE, he suited up and went out to the Power Station to relieve Stokes and what he found when he got there put him to his knees.

When he couldn't find Stokes in the generator room, he was not concerned. Maybe he'd gone off to the head. But when he still hadn't shown after thirty minutes, Locke went looking for him.

And when he found him he barely made it out of the supply room before his knees gave away and a hot spray of vomit broke from his lips. Crawling on all fours, still dry retching, he pulled himself up the walls, legs wobbly, and got on the intercom to T-Shack, told them to get somebody out to the Power Station right away.

20

COYLE WAS THERE WITH Frye and Special Ed, Hopper and Horn and Gwen, Hansen and Koch from the FEMC crew. And Locke, of course. He was sitting in the booth in the generator room, pale as drift, just trying to hold it together as Zoot and Danny Shin did everything they could to calm him.

Coyle left the generator room, thinking, *what's the point of being calm? Now is the time for panic. Now is the time to really lose it.*

He went back and looked at the body, drawn by some magnetism he really didn't understand. He was glad that he had not eaten.

The stink in the corridor was unbelievable . . . a sharp but fast-fading smell of vomit that couldn't hold a candle to that other, overwhelming stink of raw meat, bowels, and blood.

It made bile rise up the back of his throat.

It made his eyes actually water.

It filled him with a greasy, slow-shifting nausea that he had to swallow back down.

There was another smell, too . . . just a ghost of it . . . but enough to set his skin to crawling: an over-ripened, fruiting smell like tomatoes rotting to moist, dark pulp.

Inside the supply room, Stokes . . . or what was left of him . . . lay in a twisted, loose-limbed heap, covered with blood. It pooled around him and was splashed on the walls. His face was ruined, bleeding and skinless, gouged so deeply it looked like someone had taken a garden trowel to it . . . one whose tines had been razor-sharp. He only had one eye and it was glazed and staring, liquid with manic horror, nearly popped from the socket. He had been eviscerated, what was inside dangling in fleshy loops from the fluorescent light fixture overhead or macerated and tossed into the corners.

Much of it was missing.

Much of it like the corpse itself, bore an amazing profusion of punctures that could have been from some weapon or even claws and teeth of a highly fantastic nature.

It was all bad, it was horrible.

But what really grounded it for Coyle was that, almost as an afterthought, Stokes's heart had been ripped from his chest—and with great force, judging by ribs snapped like cornstalks—and shoved into his mouth.

Danny Shin came into the room, examining things with a cold, clinical detachment that made Coyle think he'd missed his calling in forensic pathology.

There was a clear, gelatinous liquid hanging from a shelf. He was prodding it with a pencil. "This didn't come from a human body," he said. "It looks like snot."

There was more of it smeared on the door frame, oozing over the floor, and dripping from the ceiling.

"Some kind of slime," he said.

Out in the corridor, nobody was saying much.

Hopper was pacing back and forth, his face aged thirty years in the past two weeks, a maze of straining cords and intersecting deep-cut lines. One eye was wide, the other drawn into a narrow. He did not look good. In fact, he looked very much like a man who was hysterically tap-dancing at the edge of sanity, just waiting for the plunge into darkness.

Special Ed was mortified . . . but was that because of Stokes or Hopper? Because if Hopper folded up, it was all on *his* shoulders.

Frye came over and towed Coyle down the corridor. "I've seen a few bodies in my time, Nicky . . . but this . . . *Jesus.* Whatever got that poor bastard went after him like an animal, just tearing and biting and slaughtering . . . but no animal ever born hangs intestines from light fixtures and shoves fucking hearts in mouths."

Coyle nodded. "I think . . . I think what was done in there was done for a reason . . . to have the very effect on us it *is* having."

"To sicken us? Kick our legs out? Make us feel helpless as whipped dogs?"

"You got it," Coyle told him. "Whatever did this did it to achieve a certain psychological effect. You see that slime in there? That's the same kind of stuff we saw at the Polaris camp. Something was brought there to create panic and horror. And I think the same thing was brought here."

21

WITHIN THE HOUR, THE crew lost their collective mind.

Things had been bad enough before, but with the murder of Stokes, the disappearance of Cassie Malone, Flagg, and Slim, not to mention the weird and frightening phenomena of Chelsea Butler, the fear on them was a palpable thing. It ran from their pores like poison. It fouled the air with a sour, sharp odor of fevers running unchecked.

When news broke of the murder, everyone made the connection very quickly after what they'd heard about NOAA Polaris: Stokes was killed by something that was apparently evil and cunning that left a lot of slime behind it.

A monster.

There was a monster on the loose.

Hopper didn't wait for the mob to find him and lynch him, he headed it off at the pass: he got on the intercom telling everyone to form up for search parties. If there was something hiding among them, they would find it. At first, people refused because they sure as hell weren't tromping around out in the snow and dark with only flashlights . . . but then, they all surprisingly acquiesced.

The searching went on for the better part of two hours.

When it was over, there were a lot of unhappy people standing around. But no one was bickering. They were just waiting for the next act and it wasn't long in coming.

Harvey was in T-Shack and, being Harvey, first thing he did was get on the horn to McMurdo and tell anyone that would listen that now they had another murder, a monster on the loose, and a missing woman from Mount Hobb who was not exactly "human" anymore, as he put it.

In essence, Clime was poised at the edge of the brink and an uprising by the crew was only days away now.

He was out of line and everyone knew it.

You didn't get on that radio about something like that without the station manager's approval. When Hopper found out, he actually ran out to T-Shack and gave Harvey the mother of all ass-chewings. Cryderman was there when it happened and he "accidentally" turned on the intercom and broadcast the whole thing throughout the station.

Cryderman, of course, couldn't stand Harvey and the others barely tolerated him, so his purpose was to make public the humiliation of their resident Freemason-fearing conspiracist. But if that was his purpose, the broadcast achieved something of a higher order: the crew realized that while Hopper was not firing on all cylinders anymore and he'd hung up his good guy station-cheerleader shoes, he was certainly not fucking around. He planned on stepping on anyone that got out of line and stepping on them goddamned *hard*.

After that, even Gut kept her mouth shut.

For awhile.

You see, they'd all forgotten one little thing about Hopper: maybe he presented a comical figure to them, but he was ex-Navy. He'd been a Chief Petty Officer at one time and the ability to screw, chew, and barbecue unruly ass came with the territory. Oh, he'd been very convincing in his Mr. Good Guy routine. He'd been calm and patient and supportive. He'd been brotherly, fatherly, even motherly. The supreme let's-go-get-'em-team sort of station manager cum track coach and president of the Optimists Club. But now that the chips were down and the fat was in the fire and his gears began to slip one cog at a time along with his patience, he reverted to the stock he'd originally been cut from.

Forget sympathy and understanding and support groups, he was on the edge and he planned on busting balls left and right.

So when the new, surly Hopper showed his grim face, people toed the line and did what they were told.

There was still arguing and bickering, but it was amongst the crew itself. Nobody said boo when Hopper stormed by like a tornado looking for a good silo to knock down and a Kansas farmhouse to kick up into the air, Dorothy and all.

Shin went back to Geolab and Coring and played with his ice cores; Locke found plenty to do out at the Power Station; The Beav had inventory to take and Gut had snow to push around; Zoot and Gwen kept an eye on Chelsea Butler. Cryderman took over in T-Shack because Hopper had temporarily relieved Harvey of that position with no pay. Special Ed brooded. Ida made some frozen pizzas for dinner. Coyle helped Hansen and Koch and Frye haul Stokes's remains out to an unused Jamesway near the runway. Everyone else just stayed out of the way.

And Hopper?

He was on a roll. He cut the station's satellite internet and got on the intercom and calmly told everyone that there would be no more personal traffic on the radio until further notice. In not so many words, he informed them that not so much as a bean fart was going over the airwaves without his signature on someone's bare ass. And he meant it.

When that was done, he told Cryderman to get lost. Then he called the NSF and received his own formal ass-chewing.

And when he was done, it was Special Ed's turn.

Maybe Hopper's about-face couldn't have happened at a better time.

The crew needed a leader with strength, confidence, and authority. It was the only glue holding them together.

All in all, it was one ugly day at Polar Clime. The atmosphere was strictly summer carnival and anything went. By nine that night, the station was quiet, tense, subdued but panicky.

People were staying in their rooms for the most part and that wasn't because of Hopper and his brand new groove, but because each and every one of them could feel something building. Something about to explode. And they were all afraid to be caught out in the open when that happened.

22

LONG AFTER THE SEARCH parties had all broken up, Frye found Coyle and brought him down to the lower level of the dome. "Found something you might want to see," Frye said. "I found 'em during the search, but I didn't want to say anything to anybody."

"What is it?"

"You'll see."

On the lower level there was a lot of storage, the electrical substation, and emergency generator room. The latter enclosed in a huge metal cage about the size of a garage. When Frye was searching, he had gone in there. He wasn't supposed to have a key, but he did.

Classic Frye.

When he wasn't on the Ice—and that was generally only the summers because he didn't like all the people—he ran a locksmithing business in Pell City, Alabama. Every winter season, he took it upon himself to pick every lock in the station.

He brought Coyle into the cage so he could see what he found behind the generator itself: chicken bones. Wings, legs, breasts . . . you name it. As well as the crushed and gnawed husks of carcasses all scattered about amongst the exhaust piping and incoming fuel lines. They were spread everywhere, slivers of bone and fragments of the same, all polished white and clean, not a scrap of meat to be found or a drop of blood.

Nothing.

They looked like they'd been licked clean.

Even the marrow was missing from them.

"Lot of effing bones, Nicky," Frye said, leaning there against the wall of the generator, chewing his lower lip behind that shaggy steel-gray beard. "I'm thinking you're looking at more than one chicken here."

Coyle was on his hands and knees prodding the remains with his flashlight like some half-assed TV detective trying to glean a clue. *The Hardy Boys and the Mystery of the Purloined Chickens,* he thought without much humor. The bones disturbed him deeply.

"Last night, three chickens were swiped from the Galley," he told Frye. "I had a bunch thawing for dinner. Somebody just slipped in there last night and took 'em."

"Anything else?"

"No, Ida said the Midrats were untouched."

"Midrats" were Midnight Rations. One of those terms like *Galley* that was left over from the days when the Navy ran the stations. During the summer, a fully-stocked Midrats was kept along with a cook to oversee it, to keep the night crews fed and happy. But during the winter, when hardly anyone but the radio operator or a few insomniacs like the scientists or Power Station techies were up and about, Midrats consisted of cold cuts and cheese, crackers and fruit stored in Tupperware containers. It was there if you wanted it. Mostly, no one touched it.

Frye just shook his head. "So somebody stole three raw chickens? Took 'em down here and ate the sumbitches?"

"That's how it looks."

"Raw chickens?"

"Apparently."

Coyle squatted there, thinking, trying to make sense of what he was seeing. The bones were in such a state that he did not believe for a moment that a human being had done this.

It was the work of an animal.

But there were no animals at Clime. NSF regulations: no pets of any sort. And despite what the movies led people to believe, nobody had used huskies or dog teams in Antarctica since the 1960's. Snowmobiles and other assorted vehicles made dogs obsolete. Now and again, in the summer, you might get some guys with a dog team trying to break a record or relive the "good old days" but that was rare. It was expensive to transport and keep animals on

the Ice. Back in the good old days they had shot seals to feed the dogs, but nobody much cared for that idea these days.

So . . . no dogs.

Then what?

"Here's what lays on me wrong, Nicky," Frye said. "Look at the cage here. Reinforced steel mesh. Take a cutting torch to get through it. But the cage is intact. That means whoever left these scraps came in through the door. Only Hopper and Locke have keys. Those are the regulations. I got one because I like to pick locks and make keys. Unless you got a stray key floating around or another nosy SOB like me, this just don't wash. Because there's only one other way in here."

And Coyle was examining that other way right now.

At the back of the generator, set into the wall, there was a grille that connected with the ductwork that acted as a heat vent. Generators threw off a lot of heat. The grille swung open on a hinge. The duct leading off from it was square, about two feet wide by one foot high. You could have come through there, maybe, entered through the grille on the dome roof and shimmied your way down . . . if you were about the size of a three-year old child, that was.

"If somebody came through here," he said, "then they were damn peculiar."

Frye grunted. "I'm thinking so."

"Why is the duct unconnected?"

"Locke. He's doing some work on it."

Coyle played his light inside the duct. It was just an aluminum tunnel that led off straight for about ten or twelve feet, then angled upwards toward the roof. If the EmerGen was running, the ductwork would have been connected right to the back of the generator itself. The light gleamed off the metal in there, but it also gleamed off something else: streaks and gobs of some transparent material. It could have been some type of plastic caulk like urethane that they heat-sealed the ductwork with, but just seeing it, Coyle got other ideas.

"Look at this shit," he said.

Frye got down there, looked into the duct. “Hell is that . . . some kind of sealer?”

“I don’t think so. That looks like that same slime we found at NOAA Polaris . . . and in the Power Station around Stokes’s body.”

“So our beasty got Stokes and needed dessert, so it took your chickens?” Frye said, a pained look on his face. “That means it’s running around in here at night, Nicky. While we’re sleeping.”

Coyle closed the grill. “Yeah. That’s exactly what it means.”

23

AROUND TEN, COYLE WENT back over to Medical.

As he opened the door, he got a funny sort of electrical feeling in his belly. Like a static charge in a blanket.

Gwen pulled him through the door and shut it behind him.

"Are things still . . . happening?" he said.

"Yes," she said. "It's getting worse."

Zoot was sitting there and her wide, frightened eyes confirmed that.

Locke considered Butler to be dangerous. That what was in her could be very deadly. Looking at her—so pale and drawn, semi-lucid, just staring at the wall—it was hard to believe any of that. What did worry him was that things could be fanned up into some ridiculous, but very frightening, sort of modern day witch-hunt when the crew had reached the breaking point and needed a scapegoat.

"Witch," he said.

Gwen looked at him. As did Zoot.

"That's what Locke pretty much thinks," he said to Butler.

He explained to them the witchcraft book, Locke's theories on the human hive, various "gifted" individuals throughout history actually being born with certain dormant psychic faculties fully-activated.

"What she is, if Locke is right, we'll all be sooner or later. That's what those megaliths in Beacon Valley are for and others all across the world. Part of a system that will be activated by the one on Callisto to make us . . . like her."

Gwen got in real close to him. "Nicky, things have been happening. When she sleeps . . . well, things move around in here. There are sounds, smells, all kinds of freaky shit you'd acquaint with demonic possession. It's scary. Very scary." Gwen tried to frame her thoughts: "Listen, Nicky. This . . .

other . . . inside her. Me and Zoot have only seen a fraction of it like you did in CosRay that night. I'm afraid what will happen if people get crazy and come after her. I'm afraid of what's inside this woman fully externalizing itself and unleashing its power full blast . . ."

"She could kill us all," Zoot said. "And maybe wreck this whole station."

Coyle understood their fears. If the crew went berserk, deciding a witch-hunt was the thing to do they might accidentally unleash the raw, limitless power of the human psyche. Maybe this is what the Old Ones wanted. No doubt they could have swooped down here, he figured, and taken the lot of them or invaded their minds, activated those ancient controls. But maybe this was a big mind-fuck. Why do anything so obvious and crude when they could use Butler to terrify and weaken the lot of them while their other pet, the thing that had slaughtered Stokes, spread horror from one end of Clime to the other?

This would undermine the strength of the station.

Weaken every mind to such a point that taking them would be child's play.

Or maybe Clime was simply another experiment to them.

More minds to toy with, to test their controls.

A trial run for humanity at large.

Zoot said, "We stayed with her last night, watching her, Nicky. And it's scary. It's really scary. I don't know if I can do it again."

Gwen told him that it all sounded crazy . . . at least, until you *saw* it. And she had seen it and it was there in her eyes, like some traumatic memory worrying away at the edge of her reason, her stability. "Last night, Nicky," she said. "I was with her and I must have fallen asleep. I woke up and she was sitting there in bed, staring at me. Only it wasn't her, you know? It wasn't her . . ."

He swallowed. "What was it?"

Gwen blinked a few times rapidly, chewed at her lower lip. "I could hear sounds . . . vibrations, squeals, shrieking noises. It smelled weird . . . burnt and gagging. And she's sitting there, all blackened and smoking . . . it looked like her neck was broken, her head bent off to the side. Like she'd been

hanged and then burned. Then she opened her eyes . . . they were red. They looked right at me." Gwen was having trouble now. She was shaking, her eyes filling with tears. And she was no crier; it took a lot to wring the emotion out of her like this. "She sat there, smiling, burnt pieces of her falling off. She told me . . . she told me how I was going to die. She told me exactly how I would die."

"Gwen . . ."

She brushed his hands aside, wiped away her tears. "I'm okay. Just headgames, that's all it was. But . . . I just don't know, Nicky. This thing in her. It's nasty. I'm afraid for all of us."

There was something spooky about it all and not in the obvious sense.

Gwen's memory of that thing . . . neck-snapped by the noose, smoldering and falling apart . . . he supposed that's how she'd look if she were burned like a traditional witch. And realizing that, he wondered if there wasn't something unspeakably prophetic about what Gwen had seen.

Butler began to shift in her sleep.

Zoot suddenly looked panic-stricken, like some rabbit hearing the approach of a hunter. She looked like she wanted to bolt. Gwen didn't look much better. Her entire body was minutely trembling. She sat on the bed by Zoot and held her hand.

Coyle looked over at Butler, thinking, *I don't wanna see this, I don't wanna see this at all . . .*

The temperature in the room suddenly dipped uncomfortably.

That was the first thing that happened.

He caught a trace of a coppery odor like fresh blood that steadily became something else, something very sharp and acidic-smelling that made his eyes begin to water. Gwen was looking at him, her eyes saying, *see, it's happening, it's really happening.* And it was. The temperature continued to plummet and he saw his breath coming out in frosty clouds. He heard that same crackling, electrical sound he'd heard in CosRay that night. There was a thumping from under the bed Gwen and Zoot sat on. A water bottle on the desk began to move, vibrating across the surface until it fell to the floor.

Butler was thrashing her head from side to side on the pillow.

A steam was rising from her and it stank heady and bitter like tannin. And that's what it was, Coyle knew, the stench of preservatives and chemicals, hides tanned to leather. He heard scratching and scraping noises, sudden peals of shrill piping that made him start. Freezing air blew off Butler in waves and–

She had *changed.*

Hell, yes, and so quickly it had literally taken him by surprise.

Once pretty despite signs of emaciation, Butler had grown ugly and crone-like, a lopsided grimace twisting her mouth into a sardonic grin. Her face was mordantly disfigured, shriveled and set with wrinkles and ruts like cedar bark. And it was darkening, going the burnished brown of tanned leather and then a shiny black. It was the face of a mummy, just shrunken and skeletal and ancient. But more so, the face of one of those bog bodies you saw on TV like the Tollund Man of Denmark or the Old Croghan Man of Ireland. Something yanked from a cold peat bog.

Coyle was shocked, but he did not doubt his eyes.

He had seen a physical change overcome Butler in CosRay that night. This was maybe worse, but he did not doubt its physical veracity. The thing before him was a living mummy and to prove this, it opened its eyes, only there was nothing but seamed black sockets behind the lids. Yet, that head turned in his direction with a puppet-like slowness and those empty sockets looked at him and maybe it was imagination, but he could feel something like a raw and nefarious evil directed at him that made him want to fold up.

The lips parted with a wet, leathery sound, and the thing spoke, "*Thee have been named, Nicky Coyle, thee have been named and selected . . .*"

Coyle just sat there, shocked into complete immobility.

He heard his breath wheeze from his lungs with a choking sound as a stark terror rolled through him and faded. He swallowed, gasped for breath.

"Shit," he said.

Butler was changing back to Butler with amazing speed. He felt if he'd blinked, he would have missed it. Like the Old Ones themselves, what had taken hold of her, externalized itself, was not just a psychic evil but an absolute organic evil.

Gwen came over to him. She held his face in her hands. “Nicky . . . are you all right?”

“Yeah, I’m okay.” He breathed. “I think what’s in her is . . . I don’t know . . . a memory of something, of someone, some witch that’s being channeled through her.”

Butler was sleeping peacefully.

Zoot was shaking in the aftermath of it. “What . . . what are we going to do?” she asked him.

But he honestly did not know. “Tonight . . . tonight, what with Stokes and all, I don’t want you girls staying in here with her. Lock yourself in your rooms. Better yet, double up and stay put.”

They both stared at him with wide eyes, but said nothing.

24

THAT NIGHT, COYLE HAD nightmares of winged horrors gathering above the dome at Clime.

He wasn't the only one, for the same dream visited every sleeping head: dead cities and alien things and the skies above Clime filled with a swarm of buzzing, winged creatures. Many of the crew woke from these dreams, shaking and sweating, suffering from awful headaches that came and went.

And when they listened to the wind howling through the compound, they detected a piping tone buried in it that filled them with the most awful sense of déjà vu.

Just as people back in the real world could feel a strange and forbidding electricity building around them, dampening the old and powering the new, so could the crew at Clime feel it. Only there, near to the beating black heart of the beast itself, it was more than a kinetic storm boiling at the horizon, it was the sharp and acrid stink of ozone that presages a direct strike of lightning. Critical mass had been reached and it was only a matter of waiting for the catalyst that would set it free.

25

EMPEROR ICE CAVE

"SHUT THAT DAMN DOOR!"

Biggs stepped into the Hypertat and Warren, old easy-come easy-go Warren, looked like he was ready to tear his head off. Sitting there at the transmitter, there was nothing easy about him at all anymore. Everything about him was nervous, fidgety, and pained like his belly was filled with nails and every time he moved, they sank in just a bit deeper.

"Chill, baby, chill," Biggs said, shutting the door and pulling his mittens off. "Just out there doing my bit for polar research, making sure the generator is clicking along."

"Sure, that's great. But in the future how about you don't stand there with the door open so I freeze my ass off?"

"Aye, aye, skipper."

Warren gave him the hard look which was about all he had these days. "You know what, Biggs? I'm not in the mood for that shit. Beeman didn't like it and I like it even less."

Biggs pulled up a chair. "This must be what they mean by environmentally-induced stress. Heard that guy in Christchurch talking about it during training." He looked over at where Beeman was snoozing on his bunk. "How's the Big Kahuna doing?"

"He's sleeping."

"No shit?"

Biggs looked over at him and despite himself, well, he almost felt sorry for the old hardass. He hadn't been the same since Dryden let him peek at his bugaboo down there under the tarp. Couldn't blame the guy really. That was the rumor about those things . . . you looked at them and you were never the same. And that's exactly why Biggs had not gone down there with

Warren and Beeman the other day when Beeman had his breakdown. No sense in looking at something that would give you the cold sweats for the rest of your life.

Beneath his blanket, Beeman's chest was rising and falling. His face looked shrunken, like the experience had aged him. Not the same guy he had been before. Just a shell.

And Warren wasn't much better.

"What's the temp out there?" Biggs asked him.

"Still hovering around minus forty, wind chill's kicking it down to minus fifty."

"Fucking tropical."

Warren said nothing for a time, then he looked at Biggs. "Why did you come down here? To Antarctica?"

"For the money."

"That's all."

"What else is there?"

Before coming to Antarctica, Biggs had only seen a few nature documentaries about the place. They left him woefully unprepared for life on the Ice. The documentaries were just shit about penguins and seals and that sort of stuff, concerns about melting glaciers, the necessity of protecting the pristine environment from contamination. Things about the scientists down there who not only studied nature, but bonded with it.

Personally, Biggs found nature creepy.

And he found people who wanted to bond with it disturbing.

"When I was in McMurdo," Biggs said, "I was drinking with these people over at the Erebus Club. One of them was this woman, some fucking lesbo. She was an artist and had been invited down by the NSF for the summer. She was going on and on about the natural beauty and how you could find yourself down here, commune with Mother Earth and become aware of your humanity, your spirituality as you lived amongst the penguin colonies. Artsy-fartsy eco-fantasy bullshit. And I told her as much. She said I didn't understand. But I told her that I understood only too well. That I hated to be

the fly in her pie, but Antarctica was not a poem and it wasn't a painting and it wasn't a church. It was dark and cold and bitter and ate human lives by the handful. It was raw nature and raw nature was simply ugly and brutal. There was nothing beautiful about it. You didn't commune with it, you fought it. You kept it down or it would take your life."

"What'd she say to that?"

"She said it would change me. I would not come out of here the same and she was right. Because I won't come out of here the same and neither will you. We'll either be fucking crazy or they'll take us out in body bags."

A week ago, Biggs knew, Warren would have told him he was cynical and pessimistic and a general asshole . . . but he didn't say that now. Because he knew he was right. This place was a graveyard and you could pretend otherwise all you wanted, but it was still a fucking graveyard.

Warren rubbed his tired eyes. "I don't know what the hell to do."

"About what?"

"About what's happening here."

"Nothing you can do but ride it out," Biggs told him. "It's like herpes: you just have to live with it." Then he saw how desperate Warren was and he almost felt sorry for him. But just for a moment. Then he felt angry at the man's naiveté. "I told you not to go down there. I told you not to go look at that monster. So if your head is all messed-up, don't blame me."

Warren kept rubbing his eyes. "We have to do something, Biggs. We haven't heard from Dryden or the others in like twelve hours."

"Try sixteen," Biggs said, checking his watch.

"I don't suppose you wanna go down there and check on 'em?"

"Nope. But I'll put it on my To-Do list right after eating snails, fire-walking, and a gender reassignment."

"Somebody's gotta go."

"Why not you?"

Warren pursed his lips, the blood drained from his face. "I can't . . . I just can't go back down there."

"That's sensible."

"Jesus Christ, Biggs. We're late checking in with MacOps as it is."

"So call 'em."

"And tell them what exactly? That things are okay up here, but we don't know about below? You don't think they might want us to go check? You don't think they might ask us to go ascertain if those guys are even alive down there?"

Biggs didn't know and he didn't care. He only knew one thing for sure: he wasn't going down into that tomb and that was that. "You think they're dead down there?"

"I don't know. I've been calling and calling them."

"Maybe they're just away from the radio. You know how beakers are."

But that didn't hold water and he knew it. At Emperor, you had to sign out and take an emergency radio with you when you went outside the Hypertats or to the Polar Haven below. SOP. The radios fit in your pocket. There was no reason not to take one.

Biggs opened his mouth, probably to say something smart-assed . . . then closed it just as quick. He was suddenly seized by that expectant, crawling feeling in his belly as he had been just before Dryden called him up from the Polar Haven and told him to send that message to McMurdo, that they'd found something.

It was there again. Just like that.

A building apprehension, a creeping dread, something rising from the pit of his belly and making his skin feel tight, his scalp tingle. Weird. Electrical. Like the polarity of the air around him had just changed and he was changing with it.

The lights flickered.

Flickered again.

No, it was not unusual. Sometimes there was a momentary surge in the line from the generator. It happened sometimes.

They flickered again.

Then not just flickered, but strobed, flashing on and off.

“What the hell?” Warren said, his voice dry like there was no spit in his mouth.

A rumbling sound rose up.

It seemed to be coming from the ice beneath them. There was a crackling of static that was unpleasantly sharp, unpleasantly near. It was followed by a shrill metallic screeching, high pinging noises. And then vibrations that rolled through the Hypertat in a rhythmic booming like the beat of heart.

Louder.

Louder.

The entire Hypertat was shaking.

The lights were strobing madly.

Warren cried out and Biggs just clung to his chair as it vibrated across the floor and a squeal of static came from the radio. The lights were flickering madly and he thought he glimpsed swaying twisted, inhuman figures cavorting around him. And then, from outside, a wild and shrieking cacophony of strident piping that was so loud they had to cover their ears. And then–

Nothing.

Beeman was sitting up in his bunk, mouth opening and closing in fishlike gulps.

Warren looked scared white.

And Biggs was not in much better shape. *Like somebody threw a switch,* he thought. *On and then off.* God, his skin felt cool to the touch. It was still creeping from his balls to his throat.

“What the hell was that?” Warren finally asked.

Biggs didn’t have an answer. He was too busy staring at the window, expecting to see something looking in at them. Something huge and malefic with the face of an insect.

“The cavern,” Beeman said and his voice had an eerie, lonesome sound to it. “Down in the cavern. That thing . . . it’s awake now. It’s awake and it knows where we are.”

26

POLAR CLIME
MARCH 15

IT WAS A LONG day.

Quiet, but eerie and expectant.

The crew came and went, tense and helpless, not speaking, just looking angry and frightened and increasingly paranoid as they were burdened under terrible stress and psychological pressure.

Harvey Smith stayed in his room. He came out for meals, but took his tray back with him because he no longer trusted anyone. He was not sure who was still human. He wrote endless letters to his mother, describing the state of the station.

Coyle and Gwen, Frye and Locke and Zoot spent a lot of time discussing what was going on in the world and, more importantly to them, what was going on at Clime. They knew that somewhere there was a creature with a savage appetite for human flesh. It was out in the darkness or hiding amongst them, but it was there. And eventually, it was going to show itself.

Gwen admitted to them that a voice—an ancient, crumbling voice—called to her in the night and it was no dream. Something had been out in the compound, calling her name.

Not that any of it surprised Zoot. She was having the dreams constantly. And hearing the voices. They got worse, she found, if she spent time with Butler.

Danny Shin, as scared as the others, sought out Locke and the two of them had many long conversations. "It's happening," Locke told him. "It really is. And down here, we're sitting right on top of the epicenter."

Shin tried arguing that no one had actually seen a living Old One. Not at Clime. And Locke said, "No . . . not yet. But it's coming. And when we do,

look out."

As it turned out, the first person to see one of the creatures and survive was Shin himself. Coming back from the Power Station and Locke, he came bolting into the Community Room, ranting and raving to all present. He claimed something was up on top of the dome, watching him. He wouldn't say what until Frye threatened to beat it out of him. Then, calming slowly, he said it was one of the things that Locke had told him about. It had great wings and staring red eyes. And it made a shrill, piping sound as if it were trying to communicate with him.

Frye and Coyle went out with flashlights for a look, but saw nothing.

Nothing on top of the dome, that was. But outside, in the fresh drift, there were strange triangular prints in the snow. Many of them clustered beneath the windows . . . as if whatever had made them, had been standing there, looking in.

Coyle had been expecting these prints, but actually *seeing* them was almost too much for him. Standing there on the hardpack, Frye next to him, the wind blowing in his face and a few fingers of drift blowing past his boots, he couldn't seem to catch his breath.

Here was the smoking gun.

Frye said, "That our creature, Nicky?"

But Coyle shook his head. "No, not the creature . . . whatever left these was its master."

Hopper's mental condition was deteriorating by the day. He made the mistake of looking in on Butler in the dead of night.

Though she was unconscious, the phenomena began . . . rapping in the walls, vibrations and distant piping noises. Shaking and sweating, just shot through with horror, he watched as steam issued from her pores. Not steam exactly, but a swirling, boiling mist that gathered above her in fine threads of ectoplasm, forming itself into an inhuman shape with outstretched wings and coiling limbs and bright red eyes set atop fleshy stalks . . .

Hopper screamed and threw himself into the corridor which was empty and thick with shadows. He looked back once and that misty shape was coming out of Medical, re-forming in the corridor. Then dissipating,

dissolving until there was only those red eyes following him, five red eyes set with tiny black pupils that watched and watched.

As he ran, they drifted along behind him.

And when he found his own office and slammed the door shut, locking it, the lights went out and then there was just him and those disembodied red eyes floating and peering into him. Making him know things and remember things.

Somewhere during the process, he went out cold.

Horn was not remotely surprised by anything that happened or would happen; he always expected the worst. When he wasn't fine-tuning the vehicles in the garage or Heavy Shop, he was devising weapons. A long time video game addict who'd fought his share of alien horrors on the screen, he planned on being ready. He'd told Coyle that he could easily fashion flamethrowers and electric prods that would fry alien ass. And he wasn't kidding.

The two remaining members of the FEMC crew—Koch and Hansen—had fashioned themselves machetes on the lathe and, like Horn, were ready to fight. It was not a good idea to sneak up behind them. It might cost you a limb.

Ida was hearing a lot of the same stuff as the others and she was not immune to the positively morose atmosphere of the station, but she refused to believe. She refused to even discuss it. She hid out in her room and drank.

The Beav, maybe having once been part of the counterculture herself, accepted it. She, too, stayed in her room when she could, listening to The Doors and Sly and the Family Stone, thinking it might all blow over.

Eicke holed himself up in Atmospherics with canned food and would not come out. Cryderman was on his own out in T-Shack. Hopper still didn't want Harvey anywhere near the radio, so Cryderman manned it alone. He even hooked up an alarm that would sound when something came in. Although, sometimes he was so drunk he didn't hear it.

Gut did not want to believe in Locke's stories, but slowly, like Shin, she came around. And when she did, being the sort of person she was, she wanted to take action. She didn't honestly believe some of the things being

said, but that there was a monster among them—or one bloodthirsty psychopath—she did not doubt. And in her mind, Butler was the cause of it. She was some kind of witch and she needed to be sorted out . . . one way or another.

Special Ed found Hopper in his room, cowering in the corner. He clasped his hands together, wringing them, interlocking his fingers, the knuckles popping white with the exertion of it all. He was very near to a nervous breakdown.

"They've been following me around and they won't let me go," he said, bunching his hands into fists and pounding them on the floor. "Ever since I went to see Butler . . . that *monster* . . . ever since, they follow me. They won't let me alone. *They'll never leave me alone.* They watch and watch and watch. They look at me from the walls and peer from under my bed. I feel them looking through my closet door. Oh . . . oh, God, this sounds mad, I know it sounds mad . . . but they even follow me in my sleep. I see them looking at me, always looking at me."

"Who watches you?" Special Ed asked him.

"Ghosts," Hopper said. "Ghosts."

Frye stopped by Coyle's room just before supper and said, "Funny how it is now. How you can link all these things together. Things that are happening now. Things that happened at Kharkov. Things that happened years ago. There has always been a pattern, but we were too dumb to see it."

"Or we didn't want to see it."

Frye stared off into space. "Ever been to the Dry Valleys?"

"Flew over 'em," Coyle said. "Years back."

The Dry Valleys region was inland from Ross Island in the Transantarctics. It was free from snow and ice all year long because the land there was rising faster than the glaciers could impede. The Valleys were like some weird sunken world that sat below the level of the polar plateau surrounded on all sides by ice and snow. A series of valleys of exposed rock and sand that were notorious for the howling dry winds that buffeted them and blew them clean of drift. Geologists went there to study the rocks and microbiologists to study the microbes. It was one of those rare places in

Antarctica where you could actually see the landmass instead of just pieces of it jutting up from the ice cap.

"It's a strange place in my book," Frye told him. "I was there my second year down here, rigging camp for a bunch of beakers from Yale. You got those sandy valleys, walls and towers of stone rising in-between. The rocks are purple and white and red . . . real pretty, I guess, if you can get used to the desolation and that wind moaning all night long. You don't expect a place like that down here. Looks like you're not in Antarctica anymore, but crawling around on Mars or one of them alien places. Weird. There's big shelves of rock called ventifacts that have been eroded by the wind. They rise up hundreds of feet, some of 'em, and look like . . . I don't know . . . faces and figures. Gives you the creeps in late summer when the shadows play over 'em. Rivers of ice-melt run through there and there's sand dunes that rise up thirty, forty feet like in the Sahara, only bigger. A wild place.

"That year I was down there, I was out hiking about with this biologist named Best. Okay guy. Shitty poker player. We got our asses lost, truth be told. Those valleys go on and on, just a maze, and they all look kind of the same with the dunes and rocky bluffs. Mid-afternoon, we come into this valley. We hike up and down dunes and find ourselves looking down into this hidden hollow about the size of a football field. It's full of pebbles and this fine sand that's frozen hard as ice. Down there, sticking up from that sand were these shapes . . . real odd looking, they were. I called Best's attention to them, suggested we crawl on down and have a look see. Because even up at the edge of that hollow, I can see the damn things are animals of some type. Best checks 'em out with his binoculars . . . then he gets real pale, real nervous. Says we have to head back. What about them things? says I. But he don't want to no part of 'em. Seals, he tells me. They ain't nothing' but seal carcasses. Seals, my white ass. Those weren't no seals."

"What were they?" Coyle said.

Frye shrugged. "Who can say? I was only there for about ten minutes before Best took off like something was about to take a bite out of him. But they weren't seals. Kind of big, barrel-shaped, you know? Things like spokes coming off 'em that might have limbs and shriveled wormy things on top of their heads. The wind and blowing sand had eroded them down to skeletons or frameworks on one side, the other was all black and shiny. It was kind of

eerie seeing them in that place with the wind moaning around you, all those dunes and towers of funny-looking rocks. Had to be thirty or forty of those mummies, some standing up, others kind of leaning, some eroded to nothing but withered frames and others just breaking the sand.

"But they weren't goddamn seals.

"Mummies of something, but not seals. No way. I'm thinking they were the same things that team found at Kharkov that year and what Slim saw under that tarp and what Shin saw on top of the dome. I figure what we found was sort of a graveyard of those things that the wind had peeled from the ground over centuries probably. Those things had probably been there millions of years . . . wouldn't you say? No matter. Best wanted no part of it.

"Anyway, about ten years ago this ANG pilot at McMurdo was into me for a couple grand on account he was no card player. I let him square up by taking me on a sight-seeing tour in his helicopter. We flew over the Dry Valleys. Took us about an hour to find the one that Best and I had visited. I knew it was the one because of this funny prong-shaped rock rising up at the eastern edge. Well, that hollow was gone. Dunes had drifted back over it. But those mummies are still down there, just waiting." Frye cleared his throat like something was lodged in it. "I tell you this tale because through the years there's been lots of things that people didn't want to connect into the greater whole. Best knew what those things were, but he was afraid of 'em. Same way we're all afraid of 'em, some more than others. And pretending that there wasn't something strange down here all these years because it didn't fit in with our science and our sense of history was a big mistake. One we're all going to be paying blood for. And that's my bedtime story for the night."

Coyle didn't say anything, he just thought about how Slim had looked the day he had seen the thing under the tarp at the crash site and how, years before, that paleobotanist named Monroe had looked when he told him about that thing he'd found frozen in the ice cave. The thing he'd had to spend the night with. Alone.

Denial was a luxury they could no longer afford, as Locke had said.

After Frye told his tale of the Dry Valleys to Coyle, he had been making his way through the Community Room, feeling the oppression and riven

silence of the station, and the HR rep had come running up behind him.

"Frye," he said. "It's important."

And it always was, wasn't it? For a moment or two he did not even turn around. He just sighed and felt his shoulders bunch, a tightness spread out in his extremities. He could see Ida and The Beav in the Galley door, whispering to one another and looking in his direction.

Yes, ladies, we are indeed up to something. Rest assured.

Finally, he turned. "What now?"

Special Ed looked like he hadn't slept in days. His eyes were so red they looked like they were full of blood. "It's Hopper. He's locked himself in his room and he won't come out. I . . . I'm not sure what to do. I didn't know who to bring this to."

"So you brought it to me? The Waste Supervisor?"

"No sarcasm, okay? I'm just not up to it." He drew Frye over to one of the tables, made him sit with him. "Hopper's the station manager. He's in charge. What are we supposed to do without him? I mean, God."

What were they supposed to do *without* him?

Was that a trick question?

Because the way Frye was seeing things, whether Hopper was in the driver's seat or not, it made little difference. He hadn't exactly been a leader to begin with. The big boys at the NSF put guys like Hopper in charge because he had what some of the old timers on the Ice called Monkey Syndrome: *See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil.* Didn't matter what happened, guys like Hopper toed the company line and did what they were told and never, ever would they question the very questionable practices of said company or blame them when the shit hit the fan.

Frye didn't know where they got people like Hopper, but The Program was infested with them same way Frye's maiden aunt Alma's guest room mattress was infested with bed bugs when he was a kid and had been forced to spend nights there. Maybe the NSF bred them or grew them in fish bowls like Sea Monkeys, but there was never a shortage.

"If Hopper's that messed up, then the torch is passed to you, Ed."

But he shook his head. “Frye, c’mon, don’t say that. I’m a good administrator . . . at least, I always thought I was a good administrator . . . but I can’t handle running a station. It’s not in me.”

“Well, if Hopper’s lost it, you have to take charge, Ed. You’re company, you’re NSF, the rest of us are contract people. The beakers are here on grants. You have the helm. You know the rules same as I do.”

He shook his head again. “I just can’t. I was thinking of someone else.”

“Who?”

“You.”

“Me?”

“Yes! You have the most experience down here. People listen to you, they trust you.”

“People think I’m an asshole.” He looked at Special Ed and the man just looked beaten, like a rag that had been squeezed out and hung on the line to dry. “All right, this is what you do. You go try and talk to Hopper again. You can’t get him to open that door, I’ll get a few of the boys together and we’ll break it down. Horn and Gwen both have medical training. Either of them can give him a shot of something. That’s what you do first.”

“Okay, Frye.”

“We’ll strap him down and keep him drugged if we have to. If it comes to that, you need to get on the wire with NSF, tell ‘em what’s going on, tell ‘em they have to risk getting a flight in here.”

“It’s not that simple. Hopper already told them that until he was blue in the face. We’re stuck. They want us to stick it out. There will be absolutely no rescue team coming in here.”

Frye barked a laugh. “I just love how The Program looks after its own. Listen to me, Ed, do not tell anyone about that. You do, you’ll have a full-blown fucking riot on your hands. You hear me? I don’t think these people have completely given up hope yet, but when they do . . .”

Special Ed looked as pale as the plasterboard walls. His Adam’s apple kept bobbing as he tried to swallow it down.

Frye put a hand on his shoulder. "You have to stand tough now, Ed. It's never been so important. The NSF has abandoned us."

"But why . . . why would they do that?"

"I'm guessing they have bigger worries. Now go see about Hopper. And keep your mouth shut, okay? People here don't need to know he's losing it until it's absolutely necessary. No need to panic them."

And that's what he said, but what he was thinking was: *How long? How long before the news spreads? How long before everyone realizes this ship no longer has a captain or even a figurehead? And how long before they do something really stupid?*

Later, Coyle found The Beav in the Galley, clicking away on her laptop. "Inventory never ends, Nicky." She looked up from her printouts. "Heard about Hopper," she said.

"Yeah," was all he could say. "He didn't leave us much of a choice."

"They never do."

Special Ed hadn't been able to talk sense to him, so Coyle, Frye, and Locke had taken the door off the hinges and went in after him. And to his dying day, Coyle would never forget the look of horror on the station manager's grizzled face when they rushed in there and took hold of him. He did not fight. He just trembled and sobbed when Gwen shot him up with a hypo, his face sallow and corded with strain.

"It won't leave me alone, Nicky," he gasped like he was asphyxiating. *"It'll never leave me alone. I don't know what it is . . . a devil, a demon . . . but she put it on to me! She set it on me so it would haunt me to my death!"* He breathed in and out, trying to catch his breath. He ran a hand through his hair. *"I lock my door and it . . . the ghost . . . always opens it. I wake up and it's standing there, that dark ghostly shape with the burning red eyes . . . just watching me! A hallucination . . . it must be, yet, yet, it's not just visual! I can smell that thing and it stinks like ammonia, sharp and acrid! I can hear it breathing and sometimes it says things with that fluting, piping voice! I shut the door, I lock it and bolt it and it does no good! It opens it and . . . and sometimes it walks right through the door or right through the walls! Sometimes I don't see it, but I hear it! It has many arms and I hear them moving, swishing and*

slithering like snakes! It has claws . . . something like claws because it drags them over the walls while I sleep!"

"Take it easy," Coyle told him. "Just take it easy."

"Fuck you!" Hopper screamed at him in a childish treble. *"You don't know what it's like! I'm hunted, haunted . . . oh Jesus Christ, why doesn't it stop? I . . . I woke up and it was there, standing over me as I slept . . . I could see its shape, smell the ammonia seeping from it . . . it's very cold, frozen, ice drops off it . . . it was standing there, watching me, getting into my fucking dreams and taking me to that place with the towers... the black city . . . everything rising and narrow and twisted! It won't let me go! It'll never let me go . . ."*

It had been an ugly, disturbing scene.

They found a 9mm automatic on the table near his bed. God only knew how he had gotten his hands on it. Bottom line was, he didn't attempt to use it on them. He never even reached for it. And that was because he planned on using it on himself, Coyle figured. He was strapped down and medicated now in Medical. They put Butler in an unused room in C-corridor where Gwen and Zoot could keep an eye on her.

"Who's in charge now, Nicky?" The Beav wanted to know.

"Special Ed, I guess."

She laughed. "Oh yeah, far out. He's the guy you want."

Coyle just said, "It's out of my hands."

"You should, you know, take over. You're the only one who can. Maybe Frye, but Frye's an asshole."

"I've been walking around the station talking to people," he told her, "about

Butler."

"She's a witch, Nicky."

"A witch?"

"Sure. Things happen around her. Supernatural things."

And that was the general feeling he was getting from most concerning Chelsea Butler . . . a possessed witch. "Like I said, I been talking to people. Trying to get a feel for all this. What's happening."

She nodded. “People are losing it. A couple . . . I won’t say who . . . have this crazy idea about stealing a ‘Cat or a Spryte, you know? Making a run for Pole Station or something. And I’m like, why? All the stations down here are going through the same shit we are if the rumors are true. But people want out, Nicky. They want to run. I don’t blame ‘em. They all want to get back home. But I’m like, *why?* World’s going to hell, it’s shitting its own pants. Why go back there? Wait it out here. We got food and heat and all the good stuff. Why risk it for that . . . that insanity, you know?”

“That’s sound thinking, Beav.”

She stared at him for a time, said, “When I was eighteen, Nicky, me and these friends of mine, we get a vial of LSD Twenty-Five, the good shit. Make you see God, right? We go up to Monterey, rent this beach house in Big Sur and we trip our brains out for like six days straight. Out of sight. Last day there, this friend of mine, Darlene—her old man was a cop, dig it—goes on this bad trip. I mean, really bad. Heavy stuff. I spent like five hours on the beach with her, holding her and telling her it would be okay. She was out of it, right? It was summer and it was hot, but she’s shivering, telling me that she’s in the snow, she’s up in the mountains in some big empty city and it’s cold, freezing cold. She’s lost in it, can’t find her way out. She described that city to me. How it was, what it looked like inside. She said men didn’t build it, it was real, real old, been abandoned a long time. Like I said, heavy stuff. Just a bad trip? Just a hallucination? She was scared shitless, man. Maybe I was, too. I never thought there was such a place until I heard about that dead city they found under the mountain. I’ve been thinking about it a lot lately, you know?”

“She had a vision of an alien city down here,” he said.

“Yeah, without a doubt. We’ve all dreamed about those places, haven’t we? And now I guess we all know why.”

There was nothing he could say to that. Nothing at all.

“I heard Hopper had a gun, Nicky.”

“He did. I have it.”

The Beav just stood there, staring at her screen, her eyes filling with tears. “When . . . when they come for us . . .”

"Beav."

". . . when they come for us, Nicky, do me a favor and use the gun on me. Don't let them get me. Don't let them take me to one of those cities. Please, Nicky. Please."

So all in all, Clime was a bad place to be that day. The silence was too thick, too ominous, too charged with something that just did not belong.

In bed that night with Gwen, she said to him, "Do you believe in ghosts, Nicky?"

"I'm not sure. Hopper does."

"We all will soon enough. Because this fucking station is haunted and it will be as long as Butler is here. As long as she's here, we're all in danger and I think you know that. If we don't get rid of her, she'll contaminate this whole place. At least, so says Locke. Those things have been reaching out to us in our dreams ever since we started this winter and it's about to get a lot worse."

As it turned out, she was absolutely right.

27

EMPEROR CAVE
MARCH 16

"BEEMAN'S GONE."

Biggs opened his eyes, looked around in confusion. The digital said it was getting on 1:30 A.M. "Hell you say?"

"I said, Beeman's gone."

"Maybe he went for a walk," Biggs said, trying to keep his crusty lids open. "Why are you bothering me about that asshole?"

Warren figured he was a patient guy. He'd never liked confrontations, had never gone out of his way for a fight. The idea of striking another had never held any thrill for him. But right now, oh yeah, he wanted to punch Biggs right in the face and maybe not just once either. He took a deep breath, then he shook Biggs like he was trying to shake the skin off his bones. "Listen to me, you goddamn idiot. Beeman's gone. He must've wandered off. We have to do something."

"It was on your shift, baby. You were minding the store. Not me."

Warren thought: *Good God, how did I get stuck down here in the middle of this . . . this . . .* shit *with a guy like Biggs? No contact with Dryden's team from below in well over thirty-six hours. Some godawful horror down there they chopped from the ice. Beeman crazy. Now gone. And this fucking idiot compounding it all.*

He released Biggs.

Figured he better before he hurt him.

"We have to go after him," was all he said. "Now are you coming with me?"

"Somebody has to mind the radio."

"Fuck the radio."

"Damn, you *do* mean business, my friend. But so sorry. I'm not going down there and you couldn't fucking make me if you tried. So have a safe trip."

Warren wanted to shout and stamp his feet . . . but what was the point? He pulled on his ECWs before he lost his nerve. Because, given time, he knew that he would. Biggs just laid there watching him with that cocky grin on his face as he pulled on his polar fleece, wool pants, Gore Tex parka, bunny boots and mittens.

"Hey, I'd go, Warren, but that place down there scares the shit out of me."

"It scares the shit out of me, too. But somebody has to go," he said, pulling on a balaclava and wool hat, strapping his Stabilicers onto the bottom of his boots. He grabbed a tungsten flashlight and his ice-axe off the wall. "I don't come back, Biggs, you better get on the horn with McMurdo. Tell 'em the truth this time. We're in trouble."

That cocky grin slid from Biggs's face as he went to the door. "C'mon, Warren. Jesus. Don't do this. We can survive together."

"You just make that call when I don't come back."

Then he opened the door and the cold found him and pulled him outside into the wicked, frozen world of the Emperor. He slammed the door shut and made his way for the passage like a man going to his death.

28

WHAT HE WAS DOING was crazy.

But circumstances had gone beyond the point where such things as simple human fear and anxiety could stay him. Beeman gone now. Dryden and the boys not answering radio calls. No, he could not honestly think of anything, a blanket explanation, that would cover it all.

They were in trouble. Possibly dead.

And maybe something worse.

The idea of going down there terrified him . . . but how could he hope to face himself if he did not attempt to help them? What kind of man would that make him?

A living man, maybe.

A living, cowardly man who is afraid of the boogeyman.

A few minutes into it, the Hypertats and everything else were gone as the passage twisted and turned. Warren was alone. Just him and that tunnel of glowing blue ice. The incandescents strung out reflected back light that was indigo and aquamarine, phosphorescent and unsettling. He was very aware of the flashlight in his pocket and how dark it would be if the generator and its back-ups suddenly puked out.

Easy. Just take it easy.

God, he'd been so afraid of losing his nerve, he hadn't even taken an emergency radio with him. Then he laughed at the idea. His voice echoed out with a hollow, disembodied sound in the ice cave. Radio? What for?

Even if you get in trouble, Biggs won't come after you.

He's a goddamn coward.

And Warren knew that he was, too, waiting so long to come down here. But . . . well, it was nearly impossible to put into words the effect that *specimen* had upon him. How do you wrap a nightmare into a cohesive

thought? How do you frame a child's instinctive fear of the dark with anything so empty as words? The horror that thing inspired was not just psychological, but spiritual, racial, and physical. Looking at it was like peering at the accumulated traumas and terrors of your race crawling forth at you out of formless, supernal blackness.

Unspeakable.

When he saw it that first time, it made him sick to his stomach. Made his head scream with alien noise. Flooded his soul with primal, abhorrent memory. Filled his brain with disjointed images of people, things *like* people, stampeding in pure infectious terror while creatures like that one in the ice filled the skies, swarming and winging and buzzing and–

God in heaven, stop it! Just stop it!

Warren leaned there against the ice wall, making himself breathe, making himself forget. And all the while a voice that was primarily concerned with preserving his own feeble life cried out in his head for him to turn and run before it was too late.

He went on.

Around him, the glacier cracked with sharp reports and muted grindings. His boots echoed out with odd, almost musical reverberations like steel drums as his cleats bit into the ice. His breath came out in white clouds. A skim of white ice frosted his mustache even beneath the balaclava.

"Close now," he whispered under his breath. "Real close."

He studied the walls as he moved ever downward. The ice was irregular, but shining pure like flawless crystals, sapphires and blue emeralds. He was beginning to feel that same hideous magnetism of what lie below. Already it was getting inside of him, crawling like worms looking for warm meat to nest in.

He knew he had to fight it.

He could not lock-up down there.

Ten minutes later, the passage opened up into the mammoth ice cavern in the belly of the glacier. Everywhere, delicate crystalwork on the walls, towers and flows and rivers of ice. All of it that startling blue that took your

breath away. The lights were still strung on their poles, lighting up the underworld, the illumination gleaming and sparkling and glittering.

Other than the glacier itself, he heard no sounds.

Just that silence that was bigger than anything he'd ever known in his life, a thrumming and immense sound of absolute . . . emptiness.

Now's a good time to get the hell out of here, he told himself one last time. *Forget this. If they were down here, you'd hear them. If they were even alive, God, you could hear them breathing. Just turn around and walk away.*

But it was too late for that and he knew it.

Sucking frozen air into his lungs, Warren called out: "Dryden! Stone! Kenneger!" And when that got no response: "Paxton! Reese! Are you there?"

The sound of his own voice was so loud in the emptiness something clutched tight in his belly. His voice echoed through the cavern, bouncing off that ancient ice and through the network of icicles hanging high above, coming right back at him with a dry, mocking assurance that no one was alive down there.

He heard a sudden peal of shrill noise like squeaking.

He spun around, dizzy, shocked, breathless . . . but there was nothing there.

But he had heard something.

A chitinous sort of squeaking.

He knew there was nothing down there that could make such a sound . . . like a crab moving over the bodies of other crabs, shells grinding against shells.

The Polar Haven.

The lights were on.

The Polar Haven was where the scientists ate, worked, and even slept sometimes. It was a red, tent-walled, barrel-shaped structure. Cramped, but efficient. He stepped carefully over the numerous electrical cables snaking over the ice. Gripping the door latch, he threw it open.

Empty.

He stepped in there, closed the door behind him. The space heater was going and it was warm in there. He pulled off his mittens and warmed his hands. The bunks looked slept in. Laptop computers on tables. He found a couple coffee cups and the coffee in them was cold. It had been poured many, many hours ago. Notebooks. Graphs. Books. A portable drill. Ice saw.

The radio.

Warren went over to it and saw that it was perfectly operational. He picked up the mic. "Emperor One, this is Emperor Two. Do you copy?"

"I copy," Biggs said. "Anyone around?"

"Not a soul."

"Warren, listen to me. Get your ass out of there. *Now.*"

Warren could hear the fear in his voice. At least he wasn't alone. "Emperor One? Kiss my ass."

"I'm serious, Warren."

"Why don't you come down here? Why don't–"

Warren almost fell on his ass. A shape passed by the window in his peripheral vision. And as warm as it was in the Haven, his skin went cold. He could hear Biggs calling to him over the speaker.

Screw Biggs.

He threw open the door and jumped out on the ice, almost went on his ass. There was no one out there. He looked all around the Polar Haven, but there was no one. Nothing.

He could've turned back then, but he didn't.

For a yellow tent had been erected in the distance. If anyone was hiding from him, it would be in there. Gripping his ice-axe very tightly, he went over there. The tent flaps were blowing around soundlessly. He could hear a space heater running. A cord led over to the tent.

That's where it would be.

Dryden's specimen.

He went over there and ducked inside, his ice-axe raised to strike. There was no in there. No one or nothing alive . . . just the thing. He couldn't say how long it had been thawing, but long enough. Most of the ice was gone

and here and there you could see the creature's flesh which was gray and rubbery-looking. A single wing was beginning to unfold. Water dripped from it, going to slush on the ice beneath. He jabbed it with his ice-axe and the exposed flesh gave a bit. Ice fell away in a sheet.

Warren fell back, that terror filling him.

He heard something like a low, almost musical whistling in the back of his head.

Very aware of just how bright the thing's red eyes were, he reached down and unplugged the heater. Right away, the cold rushed in. For one feverish moment, he thought the cilia-like growths on the creature's head were moving.

He stumbled from the tent, trying to catch his breath.

No, not as bad as last time, but only because he was prepared for it this time. Regardless, he was still struck by the feeling that the thing was not as dead as it should have been.

He moved over the jagged ice where it rose into a sort of low ridge. He climbed up it. There was an incline on the other side that led to the numerous crevices that Dryden and the boys had been exploring. Some of which were taped with yellow streamers because they led to crevasses.

He saw no one.

Steeling himself, he moved down the incline over the glossy surface of the ice, digging his cleats in. What brought him down there was something that had not been there before . . . a perfectly symmetrical round tunnel that angled down into the ice. It was artificial. He was certain of it.

He moved towards the crevice where he knew the creature had been found.

There was blood on the ice at its opening. Not a lot, but enough. A trail of it led into the crevice and, turning on his flashlight, Warren went after it, completely certain that he was making one of the biggest mistakes of his life. The crevice was about four feet wide, the floor glossy blue ice. After being in the cavern, the crevice was close, suffocating, claustrophobic even.

More blood.

A smear.

A speckling of it on the ice wall. It looked black in the bluish glow.

The crevice moved to the left, then the right. Anyone could have been hiding just around the next turn. He stopped. He heard something ahead. A quick furtive shuffling. Moving again, his blood running hot and fast, he was certain he was not alone now. He could sense someone ahead.

Waiting.

Deadly.

He raised the ice-axe, the flashlight shook in his hand. He slid around a corner and a hulking, dark shape moved away from the light.

Warren screamed.

It had been a reflexive action. For that shape was *manlike,* without necessarily being a man. It moved with a slithering sound. And for one panicked, impossible moment he'd caught a glimpse of a face behind the hood-fringe of a parka . . . something like pink and undulant wax and eyes, red-litten eyes leering at him.

He turned and got out of there, certain it was behind him.

Something inhuman with a face of crawling pulp.

He made it out of the crevice and climbed the incline. And as he made for the Polar Haven and the passage out, he saw that yellow tent was in motion again. Fluttering. The space heater was running again. He made for the passage, expecting that awful thing to come winging out of the tent at any moment.

And when he was in the passage, he heard a squealing, piping voice shrilling in the cavern, echoing and echoing.

29

POLAR CLIME

CRYDERMAN, HIS BELLY WARM with Horn's whiskey, made his rounds and was happy to do so. God, yes. Because if something needed to be done, some shit job showed up and wiggled its dirty monkey ass in the air, you could bet he was the guy who was going to pull it. Not that he minded understand, but it would have been nice if somebody else could pitch in now and then.

Cryderman, you mind watching the radio in T-Shack awhile? Hopper's clipped Harvey's wings. Sure, Ed, No prob. *Cryderman, you mind walking watch tonight? I'd feel better if somebody was, you know, keeping an eye on things.* Sure, Ed, I live for it. Anything else, you just let me know.

Didn't matter, he supposed, that he was an electrician. That he was officially part of the FEMC crew and his job was to handle *electrical* problems. Wasn't his fault if things were going smoothly and he wasn't needed in that capacity, didn't mean Special Ed had to be finding other crap for him to do.

Didn't mean that at all.

Standing in the Community Room, which at that hour of the morning was just as dead as dead got, he was thinking about Horn's booze. Because booze was one thing Cryderman lived for. It was the one thing you could count on during the long winters.

Like everyone else, he knew what was going on in the world and he knew about what was supposed to be happening in Antarctica and Clime . . . but he wasn't honestly sure if he believed in any of it.

He'd been around.

He knew people got funny when they were isolated, started saying some pretty strange things. He didn't honestly care what had happened at Kharkov Station years back or about Mount Hobb being emptied anymore than he

really gave a damn about NOAA Polaris or even Slim or Flagg or Stokes. Sometimes people got careless and when you got careless on the Ice, sometimes you died.

Disappeared.

Whatever.

And I ain't buying that shit about that Butler woman either, he thought then. *Psychic phenomena and ghosts and spooks. Jesus, like the whole bunch down here are kids around a campfire trying to scare the hell out of one another.*

"Aliens," he said aloud, "of all things."

He even told Horn that very thing and Horn just laughed, said it was tough to be stupid and not know it. Hell of a thing. Goddamn Horn. If the guy didn't have three or four cases of Jim Beam stashed somewhere, Cryderman wouldn't have had anything to do with him. He liked Horn like he liked the rest of these idiots.

The clock said it was just after four.

Three more hours of this shit.

He went into the Galley and opened one of the big stainless steel refrigerators, see what kind of Midrats The Beav laid out.

Same old, same old. Pickles, cheese, cold cuts. He snatched a slice of roast beef, then one of turkey. He grabbed some ham and walked out into the Community Room, still chewing. Standing at the entrance to A-corridor, he brought the ham to his mouth . . . and instantly recoiled.

Hell is that stink?

He sniffed the meat, but it smelled fine. And what he was smelling wasn't exactly a meat smell. It was bad, revolting even, but he couldn't say exactly what it was or was not. Just sharp, ripe, unnatural. It sort of reminded him of compost heaps at high summer, a vegetable odor of decay, moist plant matter rotting into humus and mold.

And an odor like that, so impossibly strong, was just plain abnormal.

As nauseating as it was—like sticking your face into grass clippings that had moldered for weeks in a warm, wet, secret place—he had to know what

was making it.

He walked out into the Community Room.

The smell was stronger.

Moments before out here it had not been evident. He swallowed, unnerved by that stench that did not belong. The station was quiet. Outside, the wind moaned along the dome with a hollow, lonesome sound.

Tensing, Cryderman walked over to the entrance to A-corridor.

The stink was much more pronounced, like the odor of rotting hay mixed with graying entrails blowing out hot and nasty from a shuttered barn.

Whiskey churned in his stomach, acid bubbled up his throat.

Down the corridor, something fell. Something shattered.

It was coming from one of the rooms.

All Cryderman had for a weapon was the long-barreled cop flashlight Special Ed had given him. He wasn't sure why he thought he might need a weapon, but the feeling was there. That something odd was happening and by intervening in whatever it might be, there would be danger. He looked at the intercom on the wall, considered it. One touch of a button and he had backup . . . Coyle, Frye, anybody.

He hesitated.

"Sure," he whispered to himself, "wake 'em all up because a jar fell off a shelf."

He started down A, not really knowing where he was going. At the end there was a door that led outside, led to a flagged pathway that would bring him to the garage and Horn. The corridor was shadowy, only a few sparse lights lit. On the right side were doors leading into the various offices: Hopper's, Special Ed's, a few that were not in use. On the left were the firefighting gear closet and Emergency Supplies Room. At the end was Medical.

That's where Hopper was being kept.

The HR office was open, of course. And Special Ed prided himself on that: *My office is open day or night, people.* Sure, it might be open, but it

didn't mean he'd be in there. Hopper's was locked. Emergency Supplies was always locked. Okay . . . what now?

Medical.

As he walked down there, that offensive stink decided to get a little bit more offensive until Cryderman thought he was actually going to throw up. He heard something else crash.

It was coming from Medical.

Very tense now, he went down there, holding the flashlight like a club. The only person in there was Hopper and he was crazy now. Outside the door, he heard something move in there with a squishing, watery sound.

It stopped him.

Stopped him cold wondering what could make that sort of noise. At Clime. At night.

His guts felt loose and hot, his stomach weak.

He gripped the doorknob quickly, knowing he had to do this and do it now or he would chicken right out. The need to turn and run was very great.

He threw the door open and reached for the light as a blast of fetid green air blew into his face. Inside, it was very quiet . . . though there seemed to be a distant, secretive dripping. It was coming from the infirmary beyond. He stepped over there, heard a sound in there like a man trying to pull a pair of oily rubber gloves on. He threw the light switch on the wall and went through the doorway fast.

The smell was terrible.

Drug cabinets had been torn open, things scattered about. Blood was sprayed over the clean white sheets of one of the beds and right up onto the wall. There was more of it on the floor amongst shattered glass, instruments, and empty bags of blood tossed around that had been taken from the blood cabinet . . . the door of which had been twisted off its hinges.

Then he saw Hopper's corpse.

It was hanging by the feet—flayed, skinless, body punctured as if somebody had used a hammer drill on it. A swaying man-sized husk that had not only been disemboweled but vacuumed clean so that not so much as

a drop of blood or a yellow seam of fat glistened within the yawning torso, just rib bones sucked white and pink connective tissue licked cleanly.

Cryderman backed up until he hit the wall.

And it wasn't the corpse, but what stood next to it.

He saw a face coming at him . . . wicked, agonized, inhuman . . . malevolent yellow eyes and a jagged mouth burning bright with toxic, hissing steam. A triangular, totemic head of wiry, slithering night-black tendrils that coiled over the ceiling, scraping and scratching.

He might have screamed then.

Its body was corded and corrugated with a profusion of undulating ropes like the twisted trunk of some gnarled, ancient banyan tree . . . not wood but a rubbery blue-black flesh that seemed almost hot and liquid.

It came right at him in a whirlwind mist of tissue: snaking limbs and flashing onyx talons and needle-sharp black teeth.

He could smell the hot secretions of its glands.

The stink of what it had been chewing on.

He saw a grotesque distortion of melting faces and clutching limbs from a funhouse mirror creeping forward on a tangle of spidery black roots.

He screamed.

He screamed so loud and with such fury that it even startled him. He shook his head, his heart banging in his chest, took two drunken steps towards the door and promptly fell right on his ass. He didn't trip or slip on anything; it was the horror of what he was seeing. It made his limbs go weak and rubbery, his head reel with dizziness.

He found his feet and dove for the door, but there was no escape.

Just a voice, crystal and cutting, echoing in his head.

(take me hand)

(and let your heart explode with sweet fear)

Cryderman swung the flashlight at it and one of the faces exploded in a spray of clear jelly.

Ropy tendrils slid out of the thing's belly and looped in the air. They were smooth and glistening. Cryderman shouted for help with everything he had and swung the flashlight at the fire alarm pull and broke the glass.

The creature was not fast enough to stop him from pulling the lever.

The alarm shrilled all over camp.

Before he could do anything else, a clutch of pink wormy things grasped his hand and smashed it to a bleeding pulp. But the pain did not even register and the scream of agony did not even come as the thing's mouth opened like a black manhole and a writhing cluster of translucent tentacles erupted forth and engulfed his face, sliding down his throat and up his nose, pushing into his eyes and piercing his flesh like burrowing worms, penetrating deeper and deeper into him, filling him and infesting him.

And by that point, there was nothing left to scream *with*.

FOUR

THE WITCHING

And who can say what underlies
broomstick rides in the night?

—H.P. Lovecraft

1

COYLE HEARD THE ALARM sound like everyone else.

It went right through him and tore him from Gwen's arms, whining and echoing like an air raid siren. And the moment his eyes snapped open, that feeling of impending dread that had been intensifying in him all day simply exploded and a weak voice in his head said, *Here it comes, Nicky, get ready because here it comes–*

"What the hell's going on?" Gwen said, sitting up. "Fire?"

Outside in the corridor, Coyle could hear people running. He pulled his thermals on, his wool pants, boots, and insulated sweatshirt. Put his polar-fleece vest over the top. Goddamn place was burning down, he planned on keeping warm.

He grabbed Hopper's gun and went out into the corridor. Gwen was right behind him, wanting to know what was going on and he only wished he could tell her. He could smell no smoke, but other than that he just didn't know.

"It's not fire," he finally said as they made for the Community Room. "I don't know what it is, but it's not fire."

Danny Shin came running down B-corridor towards them. "Get a move on, Nicky! There's something in Medical! It almost tore Locke's fucking arm off!"

The fire alarm continued to shrill. From all over the station, people were running and shouting. It was sheer chaos and Coyle had a pretty good idea that it wasn't going to end anytime soon.

Frye came stumbling out of his room, still pulling his woolies on. "Fucking Nora, what now?"

"It's in Medical," Coyle told him.

"What is?"

Coyle never answered that. By the time he got to the Community Room, most of the crew was there. All of them were talking at once, some shouting above the volume of the fire alarm while Frye cried out for someone to turn the damn thing off.

It was sheer confusion.

Special Ed was walking around in loose circles like he couldn't find his bearings. Ida and The Beav were hanging back by the doorway to the Galley. Gwen got a medical kit out and crouched on the floor by Locke. He was sitting there, back up against the wall, looking positively shell-shocked. His face was white, eyes staring wetly.

Coyle saw that his left arm was bloody, the sleeve of his windsuit hanging in tatters. There was blood on the floor. Red droplets led to A-corridor where more of the stuff was smeared on the walls.

"We got us a visitor, Nicky," Gut said. She was standing before the archway to A with a long-handled fire axe in her hands like some barbarian poised to charge into battle. "And whatever the fuck it is, it's still in there."

The fire alarm was squelched in mid-shrill and everyone was talking and demanding answers, but no one, absolutely no one, was volunteering to go down the corridor to Medical. Not after they got a look at Locke sitting there.

"What the hell happened?" Coyle said.

Shin, looking this way and that, breathing very hard, said, "Cryderman. Ed had him on guard duty—"

"Well somebody had to be," Special Ed said over his shoulder.

"—he had him on guard duty and something got him. He pulled the fire alarm . . . I mean, I think he did . . . and Locke was just coming in. He heard him scream and ran to Medical . . . holy Jesus, Nicky, it almost took his fucking arm off."

"What did?" Frye said, returning from shutting down the alarm.

"A monster or something."

Frye pushed past Zoot. "A monster? What the fuck you mean, a monster?"

"He's gonna need stitches," Special Ed said to Coyle. "He's lost a lot of blood."

"I'll take care of it," Gwen said. "But I need to get into Medical."

Coyle kneeled down by Locke. Gwen was still wrapping his arm. "What happened, Locke? What was in there?"

He blinked his eyes rapidly for a moment or two, swallowed a couple times. Then his eyes focused and he looked up. "Heard him scream . . . that fucking alarm, Nicky . . . then I went in there." He began trembling now, shaking his head back and forth. "Something was in there . . . *something had Cryderman.* It was eating him . . . I think it was eating him. I . . . it growled or something and swatted me . . . I don't know what it was . . . it . . . it had *claws . . .*"

Coyle could figure out the rest. "You're going to be all right, man," he said.

Locke managed a dopey/confused smile, grimacing as Gwen shot antibiotics into him.

Horn arrived and he brought the heavy artillery with him. Strapped to his back with a harness were what looked like a couple scuba-sized acetylene tanks in a welded frame. A high-pressure PVC hose came off them and fed into a metal bracket in his hands which was set with handgrips and a trigger, a nasty-looking spout at the end. A propane torch was attached to the frame at his back. Copper hosing came from it, was clamped to the hand-bracket or gun assembly. The tubing terminated about two inches in front of the spout, a flame flickering there.

"Fucking Buck Rogers," Frye said.

"What is that supposed to be?" Shin asked.

Horn just grinned. "Flamethrower. Homemade. Got me three more of 'em out in the Heavy Shop."

"You're gonna blow us all up."

"Nope," Horn said.

Coyle got it. Dangerous as hell, probably, but he figured it would work. One squeeze of the trigger on the gun assembly and flammable liquid would rush from the tank and out of the spout at high pressure where it would

make contact with the propane flame . . . *whoosh!* A hand-held incendiary weapon.

Horn gave a brief description of his engineering prowess to the others, finished by saying, "Best part, people, is the fuel. Jellied gasoline. It hits something and it keeps burning. Just try and put it out."

Coyle was smiling, too. Jellied gasoline was homemade napalm. You mixed gasoline with Styrofoam, very finely-ground in this case so it wouldn't clog the hose, and the Styrofoam absorbed the gas, liquefied into a jelly-like emulsion that was extremely flammable and would stick to anything it hit, burning and burning.

"Flamethrower," Shin said with some distaste. "That's ridiculous."

Horn grinned again, his eyes sparkling with mischief. With the flamethrower, his ECWs, heavy beard and flag bandanna wrapped around his head, he looked like some kind of polar terrorist. "I'll show you how ridiculous it is, dipshit."

"Put that thing away," Special Ed said.

Coyle said, "Horn . . ."

Too late.

Horn turned, thinking no one was behind him, and squeezed the trigger. A gout of flame gushed from the spout and became a rolling fireball that almost hit Harvey. Fire extinguisher in hand, he hit the floor and the fire rolled harmlessly over him. It traveled for maybe thirty feet and struck the far wall, where it clung and burned with greasy black smoke.

"Goddamn it!" Special Ed cried out. "Put that damn thing away!"

The Beav and several others began spraying the blaze down with fire extinguishers, but the stuff did not want to go out. They stomped it and hosed it down, gradually bringing it under control.

"Jee-ZUZ-Christ!" Frye said. "Now ain't that something?"

Harvey pulled himself off the floor, beet-red in the face, gesticulating wildly. "You almost killed me! You almost goddamn killed me!"

Horn laughed. "Yeah, and some loss that would be."

People were either astounded or incensed at the weapon and told Horn so, but not for long . . . for there came a weird, high-pitched howling from Medical. It sounded like the squealing yelps of a dozen dogs slowed down and then sped up, vanishing in a shrill eerie wailing.

"Holy shit," Shin said.

"Nicky," Ed said, swallowing. "Hopper's in there . . ."

"Come on," Coyle told Horn, taking his gun out. "Rest of you stay back."

A few inched forward, but most had no problem remaining behind. Zoot and Danny Shin were the only ones that were intrigued by what was in that room down the corridor. Intrigued, but scared. Frye held out his hands, forcing them both back.

"You heard the man!" he said. "Stay back!"

Horn behind him, Gut at the rear with her axe, Coyle led the way down the corridor with Hopper's 9mm Colt. The gun felt almost slippery in his sweaty hand. A trickle of perspiration tickled its way down his spine.

The door to Medical was at the very end of the corridor. It was open just a crack like every door in every scary movie he'd ever seen. One of those doors you didn't dare open.

If you were watching this, he told himself, *you'd be telling yourself to leave it alone.*

But Coyle didn't have a choice.

When he got closer to it, he saw that Locke's blood was on it. A smeared handprint. More blood was on the wall next to it like he had been stumbling about drunkenly after the creature attacked him. And he probably had been.

Coyle held up his hand to the others so they would stop.

He listened.

It sounded very quiet in there, but he did not believe for a moment that whatever had gotten Cryderman had left. It had not come out the door and he had not heard the window break.

That meant it was still in there.

Waiting. Playing cat-and-mouse.

Unless it went through a heating duct, because it knows how to do that.

Coyle moved closer to the door, listening to the beat of his own heart. His limbs felt heavy, thick.

"You hear it?" Gut said.

He ignored her. There was a thumping sound in there, a bumping. Now a muted sliding. He saw a blur of shadow through the crack. He knew then that whatever was in there was waiting just behind the door.

The lights in there went out.

"Shit," he said. Then to Gut: "Get us some flashlights."

He was about five feet from the door and at any moment, whatever was in there—he was picturing some hulking, freakish shape in his mind—would come bounding out and sink its yellow claws into him. Whatever it was, it was smart. It knew enough to turn off the lights so that it could get the jump on them in the darkness. Something which definitely tipped the odds in its favor.

Gut brought him a flashlight.

As she handed it to him, her hand was shaking so badly that she nearly dropped it. She quickly retreated behind Horn and his artillery. Gun in one hand and flashlight in the other, Coyle again moved towards the door. The thing was there. He knew it. He could hear it breathing with a slopping, moist sound.

It moved with a squashing noise.

And right then, a vile stench rose up like somebody had just cracked open a rotting egg. The stink wafted from behind the door, utterly rancid and filthy, like sulfurous fumes coming off a cesspool.

"Damn," Horn said.

Coyle tried to ignore the oily yellow stink, but it burned his eyes, his nostrils. Three feet from the door, something again bumped behind it. The door trembled . . . then slowly began to open without so much as a telltale creaking.

Coyle motioned the others back.

The door whispered open a foot, that stink becoming unbearable. Then it violently slammed shut and he jumped an easy foot backward, almost

landing on Horn.

Breathing very fast, he said: "I think . . . I think it's toying with us."

There was another thud behind the door and then something rammed into it. Something else, which Coyle did not think was a hand at this juncture, grasped the door knob and rattled it.

He pulled the trigger.

Maybe it was simple reflexive action, but he jerked it and put two rounds right through the door. On the other side, there was a high and wavering sort of scream that sounded almost too human. Something hit the door and with such force that the panel split right down the middle. Whatever was on the other side was not only pissed off, but very strong.

He heard it moving around in there now with that same squashing sound like it was treading over rotting grapes three inches deep. Something fell, something else shattered. And there was a deafening, undulating roar that made him take two stumbling steps backward.

Glass breaking.

"The window," Horn said. "It's going through the fucking window!"

Coyle ran to the door, threw it open without letting himself even think of what might come jumping out at him. He sensed rather than saw movement, and quickly fired three rounds. Whatever it was, it let out a manic, animal baying. He fumbled for the light switch and saw something big moving through the infirmary door. He rushed in there past Hopper's gutted, swinging body. There was glass on the floor from shattered cabinets, empty bags of blood and plasma, and lots of that slime.

It was going out the window.

He didn't even shoot. He just saw it and stopped dead.

The window was small, maybe three-feet by three-feet and what was forcing itself out of it was much larger. It was wet and glistening and obscenely fleshy. Coyle did not know what it was, but it looked almost like some swollen juicy fetus trailing the ballooning, ruptured remains of a placenta behind it. It *bulged* as it pushed its way through, a dozen whipping umbilical cords rustling at the window frame, and then it was gone, crunching through the hardpack outside the dome.

“Motherfucker,” Horn said in a dry voice.

Coyle swallowed, forced himself to breathe. “Let’s go get that sonofabitch.”

2

THE WIND THREW SNOW and a scrim of tiny ice particles in Coyle's face as he came around the dome, passing near the shattered window of Medical. Already, from the inside, they were busy boarding it up. He could hear the whine of cordless drills, muffled voices.

Standing there in his bulky ECWs, flashlight in one mittened hand and gun in the other, he felt the cold trying to suck his warmth away. It was edging down towards fifty below and it felt like it. His pants were stiff, his parka making cracking sounds when he moved his arms.

"Come on," he told Horn, his breath coming out in great freezing clouds.

"Let's get it," Frye said, raising an ice-axe in one hand.

The three of them moved forward. Coyle scanned the whiteness at his feet. The wind blew and the snow raged in the beam of his light. Frost glistened on the hardpack.

But not just snow.

Frozen slime.

Lots of it. A trail of it led across the new drift. Not just the clear slime that he knew so well, but a pinkish material that might have been blood. Frozen drops of it. There was some greenish stuff, too, and he couldn't even begin to guess what that might be. There were prints in the fresh snow, many of them like maybe two people had been walking and dragging a third.

"Funny sort of thing this must be," Frye said.

Coyle kept moving.

He felt like some surreal big-game hunter following a blood trail.

The wind moaned around him, whipping snow around. Even with his balaclava on his face was stiff from the cold, his beard full of ice. Overhead, the sky was clear and glacial, stars shimmering and auroras flickering over the distant mountaintops.

He followed the trail and noticed that the prints were now more uniform and it looked like the thing had been walking on three feet . . . maybe not feet exactly, but something more along the lines of pegs or thorns. Each print had three such indentations like spikes. Even in the freezing air, Coyle was catching occasional whiffs of a gassy, revolting smell that came and went.

It was damnably dark out there.

The flashlights and far-flung security lights did little to change that. A world of frost and shadows and bitter cold.

"That thing ain't gonna last long out in this," Frye said, panning his light around.

Horn grunted. "It's been doing all right so far."

Coyle saw a shadow dart away over near the garage and he didn't doubt its reality when he heard a sudden fragmented, alien wailing that sounded much like several mouths had made it. The very tone of it was unearthly and it went right up his spine.

"Come on," he said.

They raced after the cry.

In their cumbersome cold weather gear and big, air-filled boots, it wasn't exactly a graceful run, but they gained ground, huffing and puffing. They pounded forward over the hardpack, plowing through drifts, clenching their teeth against the cold. Flashlights bobbed in their hands, casting wild, cavorting shadows . . . any of which could have been something more than a shadow. The wind blew dead-on at them, gathering up sheets of drift and throwing it in their faces.

The trail led to the garage, past the doors, and around the side.

For whatever reason, the creature did not seem interested in getting in there. And Coyle knew that wasn't because it was too stupid to figure out doorknobs, but because it had something else in mind. And he wondered just what. The thing was probably nowhere near as intelligent as the race that had no doubt manufactured it, but it was certainly crafty. It had been hiding out at Clime for several days now. And it was only by accident that it was discovered at all.

Sure, he thought, *it probably has a rudimentary intelligence, but don't give it too much credit. Right now, it's an animal. It's cold, injured, and it will fight to survive.*

As they came around the far side of the garage, the wind brought the odor of the thing.

"Horn," Coyle said. "You get ready with your flamethrower."

Frye and Horn spread out behind him. The smell came and vanished again. In that wind, that blackness, it could have been anywhere. On the other side of the dome and ten feet away lying in wait.

Behind the garage, he saw nothing.

Just some stacked skids of yellow barrels on the unbroken hardpack, a few pockets of shadow, drift blown up against the structure itself. Without any loose snow to leave prints in, the thing could have raced off into the darkness of the polar plateau for all he knew.

But he didn't think so.

He raced forward, the air so cold it made his lungs ache.

As he neared the far corner of the garage, his boot snagged on a shelf of ice and he went down in the drift. He came back up quick, brushing snow from his eyes. Horn and Frye jogged up behind him.

As he looked forward, he saw something. Not the beast itself, but the retreating shadow it threw in the pale moonlight as it slipped around the garage, out of sight. And that shadow . . . good God . . . nebulous and weird like two men joined at the waist, distorted and inhuman, things wiggling where their heads should have been like they wore crowns of wriggling snakes.

Frye yanked him to his feet.

Side by side, the three of them came around the corner of the garage and it was there waiting for them. It let out a screeching, primeval-sounding roar like a prehistoric monster and lunged at them. Coyle felt the wave of rancid heat it pushed before it, but all he really saw in that spit-second of shock as his boots slid on the ice and he again went down was a massive shadow bearing down on him.

Frye cried out.

Horn let out a shout and pulled the trigger of the flamethrower.

A blazing tongue of flame went right over Coyle's head in a gushing surge. In the darkness it was so bright it was nearly blinding. The mushroom cloud of fire hit the thing as it leaped forward, not directly, but glancing off its side and sending it spinning away. Most of the flaming jellied gasoline hit the sheet metal side of the garage and was scattered over the hardpack.

But the rest . . . stuck and burned.

The beast let out another roar and ran off with a see-sawing/ galloping sort of motion, shrieking out its agony. Even with its left side blazing, it moved quite fast, sizzling and loping, leaving a trail of churning smoke in its wake.

Then Coyle was on his feet and the others were running with him. There was no time to think, to plot, to let the unreal horror of what had just happened sink into them. They had to get that thing. They had to bring it down now or no one at Clime would be safe.

"It's making for T-Shack," Frye said.

And it was. Still burning and smoking, casting a flickering orange light from the flames that still licked at it, it shambled at a good clip down the walkway that led from the garage to the tunnel that connected the dome and the Transmission Shack. It reached the tunnel and followed it towards the shack itself, pausing before the doorway into T-Shack that Coyle himself had used a few days before, scaring the shit out of Harvey in the process.

They went after it.

It left a trail of smoldering cinders on the walkway.

Something like cracked black plastic.

As it stood there, outside the door, Coyle got his first real good look at it. Just for a second, but that image would last him a lifetime. Its burning stink in his face, it looked bulbous and mounded like a spider walking upright, dozens of appendages waving with a slow, dreamlike sort of motion like ropy sea grasses caught in a tidal pull. Smoking fragments of it drifted off in the wind making it look as if it were flaking apart.

It roared in their direction and went through the door.

No, it did not *open* it, it went right *through* it like the door was something jury-rigged out of balsa wood. It lunged forward, its heaving mass knocking the door right off its hinges and somebody in there screamed bloody murder.

"Shit, shit, shit!" Coyle shouted as he gave chase.

Before Frye, Horn, and he had went after the thing, he'd told Special Ed to lock down all the doors and post people at all entrances. And apparently he had. And now the beast had found one of them.

Another scream pierced the night and Coyle cringed inside.

3

EMPEROR CAVE

BIGGS WAS ALONE.

And although Warren was in his bunk snoring away, he had never felt so godawful alone in his life. For it was just the two of them now. They had shut off the power for the cavern and Polar Haven below. Nothing alive down there. Not anymore. Just the cold blue ice sleeping away eternity as it had for eons.

After Warren had returned from his little investigation below—when was that? Yesterday?—Biggs had gotten on the horn with MacOps and told them all he knew: Dryden and the others were missing. They could not account for their whereabouts. MacOps told them to sit tight. Not to go out on the Beardmore searching for them. Stay in the Hypertat. Keep the generator running.

But how long could you wait like that?

Doing nothing?

MacOps hadn't said, *just wait until spring, then we'll get you out* . . . but Biggs had a feeling that that's exactly what they were saying. You volunteered, baby. Now it's worse case scenario. Just button up the hatches and . . . wait.

Wait.

But how long could you wait?

Already he felt like he was living in a tin can. Warren and he never left each other's sight. They couldn't stand each other, but they stayed together. Even when they went to check on the generator, the other Hypertats that they kept running as back-ups, they went together. Bickering, mostly. But together.

Biggs spent a lot of time not thinking about what Dryden had chopped out of the ice down there and what had happened to the others, but there were other things he couldn't avoid thinking about: madness, cabin fever. For if he was stuck in this fucking Hypertat until spring with Warren, he'd go crazy. Simple as that.

And how much solitaire could you play?

How many books could you read?

How many movies could you watch?

How many TV dinners could you eat?

And, yes, how long before what got the others came for them? How long before they heard that piercing, freakish piping again? Because they would and he knew it.

Sitting at the radio, Biggs dropped his face into his hands and trembled.

And that's when he heard a noise: a scraping sound.

He sat up straight, rigid, eyes wide. There. The door. The door was locked, but the latch was moving back and forth as someone or some*thing* tried to open it from the other side.

"Warren!" he whispered as loud as he could. "*Warren! Wake the fuck up!*"

Warren sat up on his bunk. "What?"

Biggs pointed. Warren saw it all right and seeing it, was fully awake. He jumped to his feet and snatched his ice-axe from the wall. He stepped over to the door. The latch continued to move back and forth.

"Open it," he said.

"You're nuts."

"Open it, goddammit." He had the ice-axe in both fists like a baseball bat. "Do it, Biggs. Open that motherfucker."

Biggs went over there, figuring this was just plain stupid but knowing there was no choice. If somebody needed help, they had to help them. And if it was something else . . . well, they had to go out sooner or later. Better to deal with it now.

He unlocked the door with shaking fingers.

The latch snapped from side to side and then door was pulled open.

Biggs jumped back, seeing something and not knowing what the hell it was. Something dark and menacing.

"Beeman!" Warren said. "Beeman!"

But Biggs wasn't so sure, not at first. Because it hadn't looked like Beeman at all for a second there. But something grinning with eyes like blood-rubies.

Beeman stepped into the Hypertat, going down on his knees. He was shaking, face pinched from the cold. He was wearing his ECWs . . . but still, it was freezing down in the cavern. He couldn't have survived. Not for days. No power down there. No nothing. And he couldn't have been outside where it was minus fifty.

"They're all dead," Beeman breathed, gasping really. "Something got them. One by one, it got them."

"What got them?" Warren said, completely on edge.

"I don't know. A thing."

Biggs just shook his head. "A monster? Is that what you're saying? *A monster?*"

Beeman looked at him, blinked his eyes. Said nothing more.

That look made something shrink inside of Biggs.

Oh, God, look at his face.

It was leathery and gray, seamed with white bands, a frostbitten mask. His lips were shriveled back from his teeth, which looked very yellow. And his eyes . . . they were shiny, glossy almost. Veined red. The cold could have been responsible. Maybe.

Warren was suspicious as hell, but he helped Beeman onto a bunk. Got him some hot coffee. Got some hot soup going. For a long time, nobody said a word. They let the poor man warm up, get his blood going again. Biggs and Warren stood side by side and just watched him. Warren was still holding the ice-axe. This was all wrong and both men knew it. But their desperation for another living soul canceled out their instincts.

After a time, Beeman said, "It got them. Some kind of thing. I saw it. It was hunched over Stone, chewing on him."

"I was down there," Warren said. "Where were you?"

"I was hiding in the crevice."

"In the cold? Even after I turned off the lights and the power to the Polar Haven?"

"Yes, I hid."

"Why didn't you come up?"

"I couldn't. It was waiting for me. I had to hide."

"You found your way up in the darkness?"

"Yes."

Biggs didn't know what to make of it. On one hand, he was scared inside, scared that they had just invited a monster into their midst. But on the other hand, Beeman looked like a man. And Beeman was Navy. Maybe he had the survival training and know how to survive down there. Biggs didn't know what to think, what to feel. He kept watching Beeman's hands as he gripped the coffee cup. So pale. Blue veins just beneath the skin.

They're not claws for chrissake, they're hands.

Sure. But his story . . . the way he told it . . . so flat, so indifferent, not a single note of drama or stress and terror. It wasn't right.

"Where are the bodies?"

"In one of the crevices. I saw them."

Warren nodded slowly. "Okay. After you warm up, we're going down there. If there is some *thing* down there, then we better face it now before it comes after us."

Beeman did not disagree. He just looked into his coffee cup.

Biggs didn't bother arguing either. Warren was right. Better now than later. As Beeman spoke in that lifeless, uninflected tone, Biggs just watched him, waiting for something, some monster to come leaping out of him.

But none did.

What was funny, though, was that Beeman did not touch his coffee or his soup . . . like there was something else he wanted.

4

POLAR CLIME

FRYE AND HORN RIGHT behind him, Coyle came through the door, hopping over the wreckage, bringing his gun to bear. The first thing he saw was Danny Shin on the floor, his back up against a bank of transmitters, a fire-axe clutched to his bosom like a teddy bear. His mouth was wide open, his eyes staring, his face contorted like an old man having a coronary.

The second thing Coyle saw was what stood about four feet away from him.

A spider . . . it's a fucking giant spider.

But it wasn't a spider . . . not exactly, though its body plan was similar.

It was hard to say what it was . . . just a weird, repulsive, polymorphic thing that stood on eight or ten jointed, hairless, cream-colored legs like those of a crab. Fine spines grew from them like exposed wires. Its body was swollen, wrinkled and corrugated, the pale yellow of congealed fat.

But the most hideous, perfectly awful thing was that oblong, bulbous body which seemed to be composed of human faces . . . dozens of eyeless human faces crowding together in the gelatinous, oozing mass . . . all of them hairless and embryonic, composed of the transparent flesh of deep-sea shrimp that fanned out with purple veins. The faces pulsed like bubbles, opening and closing jellied lips as if gasping for air, networks of twitching cords sliding out of their mouths and then retreating with each breath.

If it reared up on a single set of legs it would have been taller than a man, but it did not . . . it waited there like a spider, twitching.

"Holy shit," Horn said and that about covered it.

It made no aggressive moves.

Still smoking and sputtering on its left side, it filled the radio room with a nauseating stench, just waiting there as if unsure what to do. Ribbons of slime and snotty goo hung from its underside in streamers. They seemed to be moving independently of the beast itself.

It had no eyes as such, but Coyle was pretty sure it was seeing them.

Then the heads in the center sank into the mass to reveal a puckered black hole ringed by fleshy pink spines that might have been a mouth. Blood-red spikes inside gnashed together as if awaiting an offering of meat.

Coyle could hear the slopping sound of things dropping from it, the hollow sucking sounds of the mouths as those cords slid out and were pulled back in.

Gathering his nerve, he looked to Shin. "Danny," he said in a very calm voice. "Danny, goddammit, look at me."

The beast flinched at the sound of his voice. It made a juicy, slithering sound as its flesh moved and oozed, hundreds of cilia-like hairs trembling on its bulk.

"Danny . . . c'mon."

Shin turned his head a few inches with a jerking motion. His mouth was pulled into a tight gray line. A trickle of drool hung from his lips.

The creature trembled, raising two legs off the floor like a wolf spider preparing to strike.

Coyle did not take his eyes off the beast. "Danny, on the count of three, I want you to crawl away towards us as fast as you possibly can. Can you do that?"

Shin nodded, but he was shaking so badly it was hard to tell.

Coyle opened his mouth to count . . . then he felt something seem to almost *expand* in the back of his head, a black vortex of whispering voices that blotted out all else and made him feel giddy.

(come onto me)

(touch me)

(drown in me)

He looked at the creature–

Looked *and saw a massive hump swelling like rising bread dough where the mouth had been. With a gelatinous sound and an eruption of clear fluid, the hump burst open and two tiny human arms came out, then three and four and five, a dozen and maybe two dozen that were a moist bubblegum pink reaching out to him, getting closer and closer until he could feel the sickening heat as their fingers waved in his face–*

"Nicky!" Frye cried out.

He blinked and it was gone . . . it was just the spider-thing again, all those faces.

He breathed in and out. "One . . . two . . . three . . ."

Shin looked once at the beast and then at Coyle and jumped, tossing the axe and actually making it maybe three feet before the most appalling thing happened. The beast made a gurgling sound and something like a gelid, smooth tentacle slid from its body with amazing speed. The tip was barbed like a blow dart. As Shin dove away, that barbed tip impaled him right between the shoulder blades. About four inches of tentacle slid in with it, making a sound like a tongue slipping into an especially juicy peach.

Coyle screamed out something, but that was about it.

Shin lived long enough to make a grunting, surprised sound and a squeaking girlish cry and that was about it. Then his body blew up like an over-inflated balloon as if he'd just been filled with helium. He expanded in a split second with a stretching, elastic sort of sound. His windpants tore open as did his polar fleece shirt, the buttons of which were expelled like bullets.

It happened just that quick.

He lived for about two seconds like a bulging, rolling balloon animal that was about to burst, his skin strained and lividly purple from exploded blood vessels. Then he died and the tentacle retracted with a hissing sound like escaping gas.

Coyle drilled three bullets into the beast and was not even aware that he had done so. The sound of the chamber explosions slapped him out of his shocked fugue. The rounds passed right through the thing, exit wounds spraying clots of tissue and pink fluid. The beast roared and spun in a crazy

half-circle, a perfect spout of green, watery blood coming from one of the bullet holes and striking the wall and steaming.

It could have had them.

Right then and right there, the beast could have had them. It was only ten feet away. But it did not charge. It wailed with an almost womanish sounding scream and turned away from them. The doorway leading into the rear living quarters was open, but, again, the beast didn't bother with doors. It whipped around in circle, spinning like a top, spraying tissue and green blood in every which direction. It hit the wall and went right through it like a buzzsaw, leaving a few wriggling strands of itself on the chasm it created. In the other room, they heard things crashing and falling.

Coyle went in there and it looked like the beast was having a temper tantrum. It was no longer a spider-thing but a pulsating black pod, still spinning, dozens of squirming blue tentacles coiling and twining like nesting snakes. They were five and six feet in length, lashing at anything in sight.

The widescreen TV was smashed to the floor.

A table full of magazines and empty beer cans was flipped over.

A rack of DVDs was flunk across the room.

And then it just sank amongst the wreckage, looking like it was giving up, melting into a black greasy blob and making a weird mewling sound.

But it wasn't giving up . . . it was changing, moving, reconfiguring itself.

It inflated itself into a huge entity, something with two cylindrical heads and three mouths, five or six glaring red eyes if not more. It was blue and rubbery and tentacled with a dozen whipping, muscular ropes set with hooks like the claws of a cat.

Coyle fired.

He emptied the 9mm into the thing and it jumped up and back, hit the wall, came down howling like a dozen wolves, then mewing like a Siamese. Tentacles whipped and clutched, taloned feet scratched over the floor. And then it stopped right there, hesitating. Pissing green blood from half a dozen wounds, the skull of the head on the right laid open, it trembled with

absolute rage, just shaking and shuddering, fixing the men in the room with those red, oval alien eyes.

It hated.

There was no doubt about that. It hated with an absolute raw malevolence that was not even remotely of this Earth, but something born in black cosmic gulfs. Men could not hate the way the beast hated with complete loathing. It was beyond a simple emotional state, but almost biological in its dire rhythms.

It glared at them, leered, and seethed. It was not something pretending to be a man.

It was a monster.

An animal designed with an almost supernatural survivability, a vitality that was unthinkable. Right then, it seemed to be weighing out its options. They had it and it knew it. It sat there, clawed and quivering, tentacles slithering, eyes hating and mouths hanging open. Coyle did not believe for one moment that it had given up. He could not imagine such a thing throwing in the towel and admitting defeat without its maws red with human blood, without having crunched human bones and yanked out steaming entrails from cleaved bellies.

"Burn that motherfucker," Frye said, simply tired of it all.

As Horn pulled the trigger on his flamethrower, the beast hissed with those mouths and a forest of clawed tentacles came up in a defensive posture.

It shifted into a mammoth black hood like an oil spill.

Then a stream of flame hit it, knocking it back and over. It came right back up and was drenched in burning fluid. It jumped and rolled and shrieked and Horn hosed it down. By that time, the entire far end of the room was engulfed in flame. The men backed away into the radio room as the beast fought against the burning jellied gasoline, smoke rolling off it, its burning stench just sickening to smell. Its last act was to sculpt itself into a great flaming ball with dozens of squirming ropes . . . then it cracked open and the black oily shell it had encased itself in fell away, shattering on the floor like candy glass.

From that black capsule a bright red jelly gushed free, becoming a towering ooze that clung to the ceiling by tendrils, sliding and undulating, its bright red glistening mass rolling with waves.

It let out a perfectly human scream that sounded like a woman being flayed . . . then collapsed beneath the flames, melting away and dying.

The men just stood there, letting it burn.

Frye dropped his ice-axe to the floor with a clang and everyone jumped. Fumbling a cigarette into his mouth with shaking fingers, he said “What the fuck was that?”

But nobody even attempted a guess.

5

EMPEROR CAVE

WHEN THEY GOT DOWN to the cavern, the first thing Warren noticed was that the tent was collapsed. The yellow tent Dryden had been thawing out his creature in. He walked over to it, Biggs and Beeman behind him.

"It's gone," he said. "The thing is gone."

Biggs was breathing hard. "No, it's not gone," he said. "It's still here. Only it's not frozen anymore."

Not a neurotic reaction to the impossible, merely a statement of fact. It *was* gone. And if everyone was dead as Beeman said and Warren himself suspected . . . then, well, it must have left under its own power. The idea of that should have shocked them, but it didn't.

Not now.

Warren had turned the power back on and the cavern was brightly-lit, the heater in the Polar Haven chugging away again. In the curious refracted blue light of the enclosing ice, he looked around, maybe expecting to see that alien horror walking around.

But there was nothing. Just the silence. The shifting of the ice.

"Is that what your monster is?" Biggs said then to Beeman. "That thing from the ice?"

Beeman shook his head. "No, not that. Something else." He paused, looking across the cavern. "It looks like a man, I think. But it's not a man."

"You're way behind on your urban legends, Biggs. Way I hear it, those aliens don't eat flesh, they eat minds," Warren said.

Biggs grunted. "Well, if that's the case, that sonofabitch is gonna go hungry if he goes after Beeman."

Beeman said nothing and maybe that was the most disturbing part.

The three of them stood there a moment and said nothing. Bundled up in their bright red ECWs, parka hoods pulled tight, mittened hands gripping ice-axes and flashlights, they looked like they had just ascended Mount Everest and not descended into some labyrinthine ice cave. The only thing missing was the sense of joy or exhilaration. They stood there in silence, breathing out white clouds of vapor, the cold rendering their faces blank and unreadable. The only thing alive about them were their eyes and they were intense, hunted.

Warren motioned them forward and they followed him up the sloping ridge, their Stabilicer cleats making a crunching noise as they dug in for purchase. When they reached the top, they could see the numerous crevices slit into the wall of the glacier. And that huge round tunnel that hadn't been there before.

"Hell you make of that?" Biggs wanted to know.

"It's artificial," Warren said.

"You think?"

They both looked at Beeman, maybe hoping he would have some input on this, but he said nothing. Everything about him had changed. He was cool and noncommittal, his speech clipped and his manner lifeless.

They went down.

Standing at the periphery of the tunnel, there could be no doubt it was artificial. It was too symmetrical, too smooth, too channeled-looking. There was no way to know how it had been formed, because there was not so much as a scratch or gouge in the lustrous walls that would have hinted at a steel bit or hot water drill at work. Polished, is what Warren thought. Cut so cleanly, so perfectly, it looked like a tunnel of clear blue glass.

"Melted?" Biggs said.

"It's anybody's guess," Warren said.

They put their flashlights beams into it and there was nothing really to see. Just that glossy tunnel dropping away deeper and deeper into the glacier until their lights would no longer penetrate the darkness. Warren mentally calculated that what they could see of it went down several dozen feet.

"It must lead somewhere," Biggs said. "I'd like to know where and why."

Warren just shook his head. "You wanna go down, be my guest."

And the totally insane part was that, for a moment there, it looked like Biggs was actually considering it. *Biggs.* Nihilistic, cynical, selfish, fuck-you-and-yours Biggs. A man with no curiosity that did not directly involve saving his own skin. It was amazing. But there were many amazing things today, not the least of which was actually getting Biggs to come down here at all. And now that he had, he did not seem as frightened as he should've been. In some twisted way, he almost seemed to be enjoying himself.

He worked himself closer to the tunnel mouth.

"Careful," Warren said.

Beeman made a funny moaning sound in his throat and Biggs smiled at him, winked at him, as if it was all part of some big joke now and only they were in on the punchline. "HEY!" Biggs called down the shaft. "ANYBODY DOWN THERE? ANYBODY HOOOOOME? WE'RE UP HERE WAITING! WHY DON'T YOU COME AND SAY HEY!"

"Knock it off," Warren said.

"HELLOOOOOO DOWN THERE!"

Warren couldn't take it anymore.

He grabbed him and yanked him away from the opening, almost threw him on his ass. But the sound of his voice echoing down there in those subterranean depths . . . it was just too much. It made something rip open inside him. The echo of that voice bouncing around, going deeper and deeper and sounding low and guttural the further it went . . . God, he thought he'd rather slit his own wrists than have to hear it again.

"Take it easy, man," Biggs said.

"Just knock it off," Warren warned him. "This isn't a fucking game."

But how could he make him realize what that echo had done to him? How he did not want something down there to *hear* them up here. Because he was certain there was something down there, something loathsome and awful that was listening to them. In the back of his head, he could almost hear the fleshy thudding of its heart.

He let go of Biggs and at that moment, a rumbling, inexplicable sound came rolling up the tunnel. It sounded almost like the grumbling of an

empty belly.

Warren backed away, pressing a mitten to his mouth so he did not cry out. He kept backing away until a little dip in the ice almost put him on his ass. His stomach was roiling and he thought for a moment there he might vomit.

Breathing hard, he said, "Beeman . . . show us that crevice. Show us those goddamn bodies."

Beeman did not hesitate.

He lumbered off past one crevice mouth and then another that had been taped off with yellow film by Dryden and probably led to a crevasse. He brought them over to the crevice that Dryden had found the creature in. The very one Warren had been down before and saw . . . saw something pulling away from him.

He put his flashlight beam in there.

Crystals of blood were still iced on the blue irregular walls, appearing a shocking scarlet that looked nearly black when you pulled the light away. Warren knew they had to go in there just like he knew they wouldn't all be coming back out again.

"Shall we?" he said.

6

POLAR CLIME

THE AFTERMATH?

Well, for starters, putting out the fire was a real job. By the time they had doused the creature down, Special Ed, Gwen, and the others came through the doorway to the tunnel that led back to the dome. They were a merry lot with their axes and clubs and other improvised weapons. Smoke was rapidly filling T-Shack by then. They tried CO2 fire extinguishers on the burning jellied gasoline, but they had the same effect as in the Community Room: they spread the fire around, but that was it. As head of the Firefighting Team, Frye sent his troops off for chemical foam extinguishers. That did the trick. The fire was contained, though the living quarters were beyond hope, just a smoldering wreck.

After that, there was nothing to do but shovel out the smoking debris, some of it belonging to the creature itself. Shin's swollen body was removed and put in an unused Jamesway hut near the runway with the remains of Stokes. Hopper was put there, too. It took a couple hours to clean out the room and then the door was closed on it, though T-Shack and its tunnel would forever stink of smoke and worse things.

When the last of the blackened debris was heaped out on the snow and the door was repaired, Coyle and Frye returned to T-Shack. Everyone but Special Ed and Gwen had returned to the dome. The radio room was relatively unscathed despite a bit of smoke damage. The door to the living quarters had been shut and a sheet of plywood placed over the gaping hole in the wall the creature had made. Ed was on the radio telling McMurdo that they'd had a fire, but it had been contained.

He kept everything very formal, very PC.

When he was done, Frye said, "You left out the part about our monster, Ed. Funny you forgetting that so quick."

7

"RIGHT NOW, MORE THAN ever, we need to stay calm."

That was how Special Ed opened the little impromptu all-hands meeting in the Community Room. Famous last words.

"Calm, eh?" Gut said. "Tell you what, Ed, you get our asses out of here and we'll all just be calm as you please. Until then, I don't think so."

"Not with monsters running around loose," The Beav piped in.

And that pretty much summed up the atmosphere. It was equal parts denial, confusion, frustration, and animosity. Already, cliques had formed. Gut had appointed herself the mouthpiece of her newly-formed clique: herself, Ida, The Beav, Hansen, Koch, and, surprisingly, Harvey. Gwen and Zoot sat away from Gut's people, with Coyle, Frye, and Locke. Eicke, fresh from Atmospherics, sat by himself. Horn was enjoying it all, of course. The one-man anti-everything clique as usual. There was nothing as amusing as open insurrection in his way of thinking.

"What the fuck is going on here?" Frye demanded, getting right in the middle of things as was his way. "What're you people whining about now?"

Gut put her hands on her expansive hips. "Whining? You maybe got me confused with someone else, Frye. I don't whine, I bitch."

"We got six people either missing or murdered in the last two weeks," Hansen said. "And if that ain't something to bitch about, I'd like to know what is."

Locke stood up then. His arm was in a sling. He looked a little rough around the edges from what attacked him, but he seemed okay. He'd live. "What we're discussing here, Frye, is our options. And they're limited. We all know what's going on down here–"

"No," Eicke said, "we do not. We know absolutely nothing."

"Sensible," Special Ed said.

Locke was undeterred. “Yes, well, I think we have a fair idea of what’s happening and it doesn’t look good. Like the rest of the world, we’re in grave danger and we have to come up with some sort of plan. That thing you killed, Horn, is probably not the only one of its kind. Those that made it are down here in numbers as they always have been. We are seeing the final stages of an ancient blueprint in operation. And that blueprint is aimed at harvesting the human race.”

Eicke just shook his head. “And your evidence is . . .”

Frye smirked. “You want evidence, Doc? C’mon, I got some evidence for you. It’s out in the snow. The remains of a fucking monster. You want to see it?”

Eicke hung his head, brooded.

“There’s a name for it, you know,” Locke said.

“Name for you, too, son,” Frye told him, “only I’m too polite to say it.”

Gut grunted. “Yeah, you’re about as polite as my middle finger.”

“Well, we ain’t here to discuss your sex life, Gut,” Frye told her.

That got a few laughs. At least from the crew. It was not shared by Special Ed. Eicke looked more than a little offended as did Harvey.

“Listen to me, everyone,” Special Ed said, his face just blank. “The NSF cannot pull us out of here which means we’re on our own. More now than ever we have to put aside petty disagreements and grievances. If we want to stay alive, we need to act like a team. And don’t give me that look. This is not some half-assed, company-approved pep-talk. We’re way beyond that and I think we all know it. One way or another, we have to come together. We’re trapped down here and there’s no way out until spring. Now, obviously, there are things happening down here and maybe in the rest of the world that are simply beyond human understanding, but there’s no sense in getting paranoid. What is happening is happening. What we have to do is come together and take care of ourselves. There’s no other way.”

“I think we need to consider the bigger picture,” Locke said.

“Maybe that’s the last thing we want to do,” Gwen said. “The picture it paints is not very nice.”

Gut gave her a look. “Well, not everything in life is clowns, balloons, and cupcakes, Gwen. Maybe if you’d get your face out of Nicky’s lap you’d see that.”

“Shut your hole, you fucking pig,” Gwen told her.

“Kiss my ass.”

“I would but I don’t want to get a mouthful of hair.”

Gut stood up, her face red.

Coyle insinuated himself in there now. “Jesus Christ, Gut. We’re all in this together. Quit acting like a fucking bully.”

She laughed. “Well, I’d expect that from you, Nicky. You ain’t been right since you started plowing her field.”

“That has nothing to do with it.”

“I’m thinking it does.”

Frye started laughing. “Don’t mind her, Nicky. She’s been the playground bully ever since she first got hair on her nuts.”

“Nobody asked for your opinion, wiseass,” Gut said.

Gwen slammed her fist down on the table. “All right, all right! Quit acting like children! Christ, Gut, act your fucking age!” When that brought silence, she said. “What I mean is that swapping ghost stories won’t get us anywhere. I think we’re all pretty scared, but working our imaginations overtime is a little counterproductive.”

Gut made a snorting sound and nobody there was sure whether she did it with her mouth or with her ass. “Say what you want, Gwen. All of you, say what you want. We’re in danger here. Avoiding it won’t help. We either take this on our feet or on our knees.”

That brought silence: nobody could disagree with it.

Ida began to sob into her hands.

Gut coughed and all eyes were again on her, the way she liked it. “Listen. You all know me. I don’t tiptoe around—”

Frye laughed.

“—and maybe I ain’t the most sensitive of women–”

"I don't believe that for a minute," Frye said.

She turned on him. "Yeah, well, fuck you! Why don't you shut your piehole and let me talk?"

Special Ed sighed. "Please, people. Go ahead, Gut."

She cleared her throat, some of the redness fading from her cheeks. "Now, I been hearing the same shit you all have. Aliens and monsters and dead cities. Well, it's probably true. At least the monster part of it. But none of that shit matters. What matters is us. We're here and what are we going to do about it? Well, I have a suggestion. Out in the garage we got Sno-Cats and Sprytes and a Delta. I say we load up and make for Pole Station. That's sensible, way I see things. Anybody don't wanna come along, then you stay here. Stay here and let those things have you. I'm ready right now to take a trip and I ain't waiting for NSF approval either. Who wants to come with me?"

"That's ridiculous," Special Ed said. "You can't cross the polar plateau. Not in the winter."

"You watch me."

Horn started laughing. "You think you can reach Pole?"

"I'm willing to bet I can."

He just shook his head. "Gut, you might be a real whiz pushing snow around, but you're not up to the plateau. None of you are. Out there, you play for keeps. You break down and you got about an hour before you freeze to death. No, Gut, maybe Coyle or Frye could try it, but you know the plateau and polar navigation like I know tampons."

"That's about the size of it," Frye chimed in.

Gut was red-faced again, practically foaming at the mouth. "What? You think because you got something swinging between your legs, Frye, you're better than me?"

"No, not better, just smarter," he said.

"Fuck you! Just fuck you, you goddamn asshole!"

Frye was enjoying it. "See, boys? If there's a slit in the bottom, the brain always falls out."

Gut was just beyond herself. Balling her hands into fists, she said, "Goddammit! I know my job! I know machinery! I know all there is to know about this fucking place! I'm the equal of any man here!"

"Well, we ain't talking about the size of your cock or the hair on your chest, Gut," Frye said.

Special Ed got in front of her so she didn't launch herself at Frye. And from the way she was looking—ready to chew pig-iron and piss staples—that's exactly what she was planning to do.

"This is pointless," Eicke said.

"And it's been that way since the beginning," Horn told him.

Seeing that Frye's particular brand of sledgehammer diplomacy was failing, Coyle told the lot of them to quiet down. "Listen to me. All of you. Nobody's going anywhere. We got shelter and food and we're going to stay right here. That's the only alternative there is. Just the one. Crossing the polar plateau is suicide."

"Yeah," Gut said, "and who died and made you king?"

"I did," Special Ed informed her. "Nicky is talking sense. Nobody's leaving this station and that's the way it is."

Gut looked to her clique for support and got none. Finally, she just threw her hands up and walked over to the coffee pot and poured herself another cup, swearing under her breath the whole way.

What the lot of them needed, Coyle knew, was sleep. Nobody had gotten much tonight. It was nearly five in the morning and they were all slugging back Ida's coffee which was just this side of paint varnish. They were all afraid and thinking rash, confused, out of sorts.

"Okay," Coyle said. "We have to stay. But that don't mean we have to sit on our asses and wait for something to get us. We arm ourselves. We stay together. And that goes for you, too, Dr. Eicke. No more hiding out in Atmospherics. We stay together. We bunk-in together. We stay alive, we stay on guard. We keep the ball rolling and our skins in one piece. It's the only way to handle this."

"Damn straight," Horn said. "Now I know you people don't like me and I'm fine with that because I think you're all a bunch of greedy, self-serving

assholes–"

"Horn, please," Special Ed said.

Frye said, "No, no, let him go, Ed. He's telling it the way it is."

"Thing is," Horn told them, "I was the guy that toasted our monster. Everything Coyle and Frye said is true. But it wasn't a ghost or a demon or something. It was flesh and blood and it died just fine. That's my point. I got four flamethrowers made and I can make a fifth. I've got three electric prongs hooked to battery packs on handcarts. These babies can put two-twenty into anything you stick 'em into. So we're not defenseless."

"Exactly," Special Ed said.

Coyle watched the reaction to that. A lot of grumbling, not much else. After what they'd all heard howling in Medical and what Frye, Horn, and he himself had been saying, none of them liked the idea of playing monster-hunter. For if any of what Locke had been whispering about for weeks was true, they were seriously outnumbered even with Horn's toys.

"It's the only logical thing to do," Coyle told them in all earnestness. "I think you all know that. As I said, we arm ourselves. We sleep in shifts. We post guards. We follow the buddy system: nobody alone at any time. We lock down all the doors to the outside, the tunnels, everything. And we remain vigilant. Maybe there's no more of those things out there. Maybe we're in no danger at all, but we have to act like we are. That's all there's to it."

Gut didn't like it. Not in the least. You could see that. "So we sit and wait and hope for the best? Yeah, that makes great sense. Tell that to Slim and Doc Flagg, Cryderman and Shin. I'm sure they'd approve of sitting here with well-oiled thumbs shoved up our asses."

"It's a plan and it's sensible," Special Ed told her. "And it's what we're going to do."

"Fucking bullshit," Gut said.

"Oh, for chrissake, Gut," Frye said, getting sick of the sound of her voice. "Put your fucking wiener away, we're tired of looking at it."

Gut shook her head and stomped from the room, making for C-corridor. Everyone watched her leave.

Horn said, "Hey, Locke. You said my monster had a name. Want to share it with us?"

Locke looked around at those worn faces. "I can't be entirely sure. But there is a story of a beast called a *Shoggoth*."

"Hell's that?" Frye wanted to know. "Sounds like something you eat at a Pakistani restaurant with a side order of curry and chic peas."

Locke ignored him. "A Shoggoth is something that has been whispered about for thousands of years," he explained. "According to primal myth, the Shoggoth was the first life form the Old Ones engineered on this planet. All life was supposedly developed from them. They were created as sort of a servitor race, a slave race."

"So we all descended from monsters? Least that explains Gut," Frye said.

"I'm not saying that this thing *was* a Shoggoth exactly. Supposedly, they've been extinct a long time. But perhaps something like one . . . an evolved form or something developed from the Shoggoth."

Eicke stood up and walked over to the coffee pot. "That's absurd. Utterly absurd."

"Maybe not, Doc," Frye said. "It had to be something and it sure didn't look much like a penguin or a leopard seal."

"Absurd, maybe," Locke said. "But certainly not impossible. I think—whatever it was—it was the same thing that wiped out NOAA Polaris. I think it was brought there on purpose just as it was brought here on purpose to do the very thing it did."

Again, he told them he was speculating wildly. But he reminded them of the aluminum coffin-like box Gwen and Coyle had found abandoned at NOAA Polaris. He believed that it was a containment vessel, something used to transport the creature.

"I think if we go look around out there, poke in enough drifts, we might find a similar container that our creature arrived in."

"And who brought it here?"

"The aliens. The Old Ones, the Elder Things. Whatever you want to call them. They are taking this world and that thing was one of their weapons."

Harvey, who had been pretty much silent, decided it was time to be heard. "I've been listening to all of you. And it seems to me you're missing the obvious connection here. You think this beast came here in some box, but maybe there's a much more obvious explanation."

"Do tell," Gwen said.

"Butler. Butler was the monster. All along, it was her."

"No," Coyle said. "Trust me. That thing wasn't Butler."

"How do you know?" The Beav asked.

"If you'd have seen it," Frye said, "you wouldn't ask that question."

Harvey got a manic look in his eyes. "You know nothing then. The rest of us know what that woman is. We know she's a–"

"What?" Gwen wanted to know.

He looked around, that look in his eyes becoming a very frightening animal sort of gleam. He clenched his teeth, said, "Witch."

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Frye said. "*Witch?* Now I've heard it all, Harv. Man, you've been flakier than a box of Post Toasties from day one . . . but this is the last straw. Ed, get me the straight jacket for this boy. A witch. Man oh man. Well, before she tries to fly off on her broom you better throw water on her and melt her ass. Just remember: I got first dibs on them ruby slippers."

"I don't care what you say! We've all seen what she can do! *She's a witch!*" Harvey cried out. "She has to be dealt with!"

Nobody sitting there looked nearly as shocked by it as they should have. That was the disturbing part. Gwen and Coyle looked at each other. Locke was intrigued. Frye did some swearing and Horn looked amused. Special Ed looked like he'd been slapped and Eicke just looked defeated. But the others, and particularly, Gut's clique, didn't look surprised in the least. Ida and The Beav just caught one another's eyes and nodded, as if they'd expected Butler was indeed something like that. Koch looked scared and Hansen simply mouthed "witch" silently, his eyes glazed.

Coyle felt very hollow inside.

Witch.

Yes, that's what Harvey had said, as in Wicked Witch of the West. Oh boy. Not good. But it fit and he knew it did. He remembered Locke's book, his own inference of it that told him that certain witches of history were *really* witches. Members of the human hive, as it were, who were born with their alien-engineered psychic abilities fully activated. He also remembered that morning in the shower room when Locke had discussed this very thing with him. But he hadn't stopped with the witches of history, he had named a sorceress amongst them here and now: Chelsea Butler.

She's been with them, Nicky, he'd said. *They've opened up something in her that they'll soon open up in the rest of us. I don't pretend to know how she ended up here or why, but I will tell you she's dangerous.*

Butler is a witch.

"She's not a witch," Gwen said.

"Maybe she is," Frye said, looking at Gut's clique. "Because she cast a spell over the lot of you, turned you into fucking morons."

Eicke cleared his throat. "Superstition is something I have no patience for . . . yet, I have seen certain phenomena around that woman. I can't deny it. Maybe she is . . . something like a witch."

"All right, all right," Special Ed said to him. "Witches. That's totally ridiculous. Dr. Eicke, I'm surprised at you . . . this is going into your file. If ever I've seen a case of gross negligence and incompetence on the part of professional, this is it. No, no, I won't hear any more of this. Let's concentrate on the here and now."

"That witch is part of the here and now," Gut said.

And now that their leader had broached it, they all speculated wildly: witches, aliens . . . they were having a field day. Eicke, maybe taken aback by what Special Ed said, kept telling them there was no hard evidence for alien intervention. Special Ed tried to steer it all into something more practical and Horn kept laughing at all of it. Gwen said nothing and Zoot just buried her face in her hands.

Coyle watched them go at it and the feeling of hopelessness grew in him until it was a forest that he couldn't hack his way free of. The teamwork thing wasn't going to work and he knew it. On the outside, the crew would go

through the motions, but inside, where it mattered, they would still be the same divisive nitpickers and backstabbers.

The future did not look bright.

What concerned him most was Gut's clique. They would be the epicenter of trouble and he knew it.

The gathering broke up gradually and Special Ed told everyone to get some sleep. That was about it.

When they were all gone, Frye said, "We're pretty well fucked here, Nicky."

"Don't I know it."

8

AS THEY WALKED DOWN B-corridor side by side, Gwen said, "You saw them, Nicky. You saw the way they were thinking. Eicke might be in denial and Special Ed might pretend things are fine and dandy, but Gut's clique is thinking dangerous thoughts. I saw it. You saw it. The pep talks you and Special Ed gave about brotherly love were sweet and heartfelt, but none of them are buying it. There's going to be trouble."

"I know," he said. "And it's only a matter of time."

She stopped, looking at him. "Mama don't like Butler much either . . . but she don't want her strung or burnt at the stake. And I think that's where this is going. Somewhere bad."

Coyle knew she was right. "I don't think there's any talking reason to them. Not while Butler's here and things keep happening. They're like a bunch of fucking peasants. It's crazy."

"Question is, Nicky: if they try something stupid, how far are we going to go to stop them?"

"Maybe *we* won't have to."

She looked at him.

"I've been thinking this over for some time," he told her. "We have to get Butler out of here. I was thinking of calling Colony. Maybe they'd want her. Maybe they'd take her off our hands. If what I've been hearing is true, what's one more freak for their collection?"

"What if they *sent* her, Nicky?"

He shrugged. "I'm going to have Ed give them a call. It might be our only way out."

9

EMPEROR CAVE

AS WARREN EDGED INTO the crevice, Biggs felt something uncurl inside his belly like an insect spreading its legs. When they had moved down the passage to the cavern, he had been scared gutless, every moment wanting to turn and run back to the Hypertat. But then . . . when they'd reached the cavern itself . . . there had been something like euphoria. As deadly as that place was, as haunted as it must be, he felt exhilarated, speechless with a manic joy that was inconceivable. Even to himself. But he could not shake it and something inside him hoped he never would.

But now that had changed.

After shouting into the tunnel and freaking out Warren, he suddenly seemed to realize what he was doing. And the realization made his nerves jump and adrenaline surge hotly in his belly. He was sensing not only danger now, but something as far removed from ordinary peril as a hurricane is removed from a thunderstorm.

It was big and violent and it owned him.

Death was coming now and something inside him instinctively recognized it.

Death.

Closer and closer.

You could turn back, you know, he thought. *You know damn well you could care less if Warren thinks you've lost your nerve, that you're a coward. Things like that mean nothing to you.*

But he couldn't turn back. For inside him, there actually was curiosity like there'd never before been in his life. It was eating him alive. It wanted to know what this was about and it could not rest until it did.

So like a man who presses the muzzle of a revolver against his temple, wondering grimly what it will feel like to have his brains and consciousness reduced to a bloody pulp of tissue, Biggs entered the crevice.

10

TEN MINUTES INTO IT, they were already leagues deeper into the crevice than Warren had been on his previous visit.

Their flashlight beams danced over walls of that impossibly flawless, opalescent blue ice that almost looked like some kind of thermoformed plastic. They were seeing ancient seams and jagged striations that were hundreds of thousands of years old and quite possibly millions. Now and again, they'd glimpse something deep in the ice, some shadowy shape, that they did not dare comment upon.

And the blood, of course.

Because they were seeing that, too.

Splotches. Stains. Smears that were crystallized red. Something had happened down here and maybe it was a monster like Beeman said and maybe it was something else. And for Warren, everything inside him cold and trembling, he could almost feel the agony, the horror, the savagery of death down here.

Suddenly, Beeman stopped and Biggs nearly walked into him.

"What?" Biggs said. "What the hell is it?"

"Nothing," Beeman said.

But something had stopped him, some force no one else could feel had stayed him, stopped him dead and Warren did not believe for a moment it was nothing. He shined his light around. The crevice continued deeper into the meat of the glacier. To the left, there was a small ell that ended in a seam you couldn't have slipped a sheet of paper into and off to the right . . .

What was that?

A fissure that went on for about ten feet, the ice walls pressing in quite close, and then ending at a sheer face that was very smooth, very unlined. Warren went over to it. It was not old ice. It looked recent. And when he put

his light up against it, he could see it was only a few inches thick. A space behind it.

And on the ice floor, he could see the telltale marks of cleats. They led right to the wall and stopped.

Beeman knew, Warren thought. *He knew there was something here. That's why he stopped.*

"What're you doing?" Biggs asked.

But Warren didn't answer. He took his ice-axe and swung it at the face. Kept swinging it until cracks appeared and ice chips were flying in every direction. Finally, the axe burst through and Warren frantically broke more of the face out until he could get his arm and flashlight in there.

Right away, he saw something.

"Come on, Warren," Biggs said, looking around nervously. "Let's get this shit done with."

"There's something back here," Warren said.

He knocked the rest of the ice free and stepped into the space beyond which was like a dome-shaped room, a pocket in the glacier. The floor sloped downwards to an ice pit and in it–

Corpses.

Mummified things.

"Shit," Biggs said, swallowing. "Old . . . they look old."

And they did.

For down in that pit, there were six or seven bodies, shriveled things with faces like corrugated and seamed driftwood. Dead men, yes, but not men that had died recently but a long time ago. They were tangled together in a heap, legs splayed out, hands reaching skyward as if they were either reaching out to something or warding it off. And they all wore the standard kit of the early explorers: dog-fur mitts and woolen mufflers, wool pants and reindeer-fur finnesko boots, fur parkas and Burberry suits.

Whoever they were, they'd been down here a long time.

Using his cleats and ice-axe, Warren went down there until he crouched next to the bodies. They were mummies, really, leathery things dried and

preserved by the cold, the moisture leeched from them by the impossibly dry climate of the Beardmore Glacier. Warren figured they had been down here at least eighty years, but probably much longer. Their clothing was iced, immovable, as were their reaching limbs. Like deadwood sculptures rather than anything that had once been alive.

"Their faces," Biggs said from above.

But Warren was seeing them. It could have been the cold, the contraction of muscles at death . . . but he didn't believe it. The faces were gunmetal gray or black, but each and everyone he could see had died with their mouths peeled open in a scream, faces contorted, eye sockets wide. He wasn't going to come right out and say they died of fright, but whatever had happened, it must have been horrible beyond belief.

"Maybe they fell into a crevasse," Biggs said, but from his tone it was obvious he did not believe it.

It could have happened that way, Warren figured. Countless men, dogs, and pony teams had fallen into crevasses in the old days. But he didn't think that happened here. They were all on their backs, frozen together, except one that was lying face down. Using his ice-axe, Warren scraped the ice away from the man's back. His Burberry suit had been peeled away. His back was bare, blackened and fissured, and there was something between his shoulder blades rising from the desiccated flesh.

Biggs was on his knees now at the rim of the pit, shining his light down. Crystals of ice danced in the beam. "Looks . . . looks like a spider."

"Can't be," Warren said.

But it did look like a spider.

One of those hideous side-to-side scuttling crab spiders they had in the desert or jungle. Except this one was lodged in the corpse's back, mounded like it was trying to pull itself free. It was just as blackened and seamed as the man himself, splitting open from the cold and dryness, but Warren could see its segmented, hairless body where it broke free of the skin, the jointed legs which were the thickness of pencils. The way it was connected, not like it was a separate entity, but like–

It was riding him. Riding him like some kind of leggy parasite.

Right then, as Warren climbed from the pit, not wanting to be down there any longer with the frozen dead and that spidery thing, he realized that Dryden and the others must have found the pit, too. But somehow, someway, a sheet of ice had formed over the entrance to hide the opening.

And he didn't believe that was accidental.

Biggs's eyes looked like they wanted to come right out of his head. "What the hell was that?" he wanted to know. "Why was it growing from him like that?"

But Warren didn't know and part of him was grateful for that.

Maybe fifteen minutes later, after navigating one blind turn after the other, they found the cavity in the ice where Dryden had chopped out the creature. And just beyond that, a little grotto in the ice and in it, the bodies.

"Holy shit," Biggs said.

Dryden, Stone, Kenneger . . . God, jumbled together and slaughtered, faces peeled down to skulls and bellies split open, entrails snaking over the ice like frozen worms. And everywhere, pooled and sprayed, blood freeze-dried into red ice that sparkled in the lights.

Biggs turned away from them. "Okay, now we've seen 'em. Beeman's right. Now let's get the fuck out of here."

Warren thought that was sound advice . . . but like the bodies in the pit, these demanded that he examine them closer. Because if he wanted answers or intimations of the same, he would find them amongst the grisly remains before him.

"Please, Warren," Biggs said.

"Just a minute. I have to see something."

Beeman who had barely spoken a word in the past hour began to get a little skittish. "Biggs is right," he said. "We should get out of here before that thing comes back."

"Yeah," Biggs said. "Come on."

Beeman just stood there, his face unreadable beyond the fur fringe of his zipped-up parka hood. Biggs was scared. Scared like Warren had never seen

him scared before. And Warren knew it was this place, at least part of it was. The noxious atmosphere of this tomb in the ice.

But he had to see.

He had to know even as fingers of fear spread through his belly and into his chest, he had to see. To understand.

For the bodies were all *wrong* somehow.

Good God! Get the fuck out of here! Get out!

But he couldn't.

Up close, wreathed in frozen blood, the bodies had been savagely mauled. Their ECWs had been torn free, the flesh beneath bitten, chewed, gnawed. Teeth marks in raw red meat were evident, claw-marks, scrapes, gouges and furrows. Like something with immense claws and huge teeth had been at them. Warren could clearly see the bite mark in one throat where something had bitten out a mouthful of flesh.

Yes, the feeding was evident.

But the bodies themselves . . . then he knew.

They weren't just jumbled together. No. They were *pressed* together, melted together like they had grown that way. Even with his ice-axe, he could not pry them apart . . . quilts of flesh grew into quilts of flesh, muscles were linked with other muscles, bones growing right through other bones. Not three men, but one single entity like some protoplasmic thing that had been splitting. Dryden, Stone, Kenneger, they had been fused into a single gory, fleshy whole, a webbing of tissue.

You don't need to know more than that. You don't need to.

Beeman was beginning to make a throaty wailing sound like an Indian warrior singing his death-song. In the close confines of the ice grotto, his voice echoed out with a ghostly, eerie sound.

"Goddammit, Warren!" Biggs said. "We have to get out of here! Beeman's fucking losing it!"

But Warren was fixated with what he was seeing.

Grown together.

And their bodies, not just fused, but *channeled*. Some of the wounds he had thought were punctures were not punctures at all, but holes that had been tunneled through flesh. Something had been burrowing into them. With his ice-axe, he pulled something free of one of these holes and it dropped to the ice . . . a curled up, spidery thing with legs folded under it. Yes, just like the thing on the back of that mummy in the pit, only a juvenile form. Dead. Warren, a dry giggling building in his throat, began tearing at the burrows and more of those little horrors fell free, leggy and perverse.

And then he knew.

An incubator. All three of them . . . Dryden, Stone, Kenneger . . . they had grown together like some kind of human fungi to provide warmth and food for the things coming to term within them. An incubator. A human incubator.

Warren pulled himself away. "But it's been allowed to freeze up," he said under his breath. "Now why would that be?"

"Fuck are you talking about?" Biggs wanted to know.

But Warren could not explain, for even then the seeds of madness and horror were just taking root in his own soul and the greater purpose of it all was beginning to make itself known.

He saw something glinting on the hand of one of the corpses.

It drew his eye.

A ring.

Behind him, Beeman was wailing with a wild, screeching sound that sounded inhuman, like some insect calling out to the swarm.

But that ring . . .

Warren looked closer.

An Annapolis ring. Only those who had graduated from the Naval Academy at Annapolis, Maryland would have one. Dryden. Stone. Kenneger. Warren knew their histories. They were not military men.

But Beeman was.

Beeman.

"C'mon, Warren!" Biggs cried out now. "We have to get out of here before it comes back! Before that thing returns!"

And, Warren, slowly swiveling his head on his neck, breathed out a string of words: "I think we're too late."

And Beeman moved.

Or maybe it was Dryden. Or Stone. Or Kenneger.

There was no way to know. It moved quickly, becoming what it was and being content with that . . . a hunched-over scarecrow-thing with a bulbous head and two huge yellow-pink eyes veined in red, eyes that hated with a feral intensity. Its face was red and raw, threaded with pink and pale seams of tissue . . . a pulpy and stringy mask that crawled like worms over what was beneath.

Biggs screamed as he saw that immense puckered mouth open and display its fan of gray teeth like darning needles . . . a perfect circle of them.

A splayed hand with webbing between the fingers and black, thorny claws lashed out and took his throat out in a spray of blood. His face came off like a flap of meat. And when he went down, the Beeman-thing took hold of him and buried its puckered, fanged mouth to his throat and began to feed with horrible, sucking sounds.

Warren screamed and rushed it.

It clawed out at him with hooked talons and fingers that were oddly scaly and mottled. Warren ducked away from it and it tossed Biggs's bleeding corpse aside and came at him, hobbling over the ice, that puckering mouth pulling away from snake-like fangs, blood and blue-black ichor dripping.

Warren dove at it.

He dove and brought the ice-axe down on its head with everything he had and the blade sank into its skull to the hilt. There was no give like with bone, just a soft and mucid rottenness that the axe bisected easily. The Beeman-thing pulled back, wailing with a piercing, unearthly sound as it tried to pull the axe from the crown of its skull. Beneath its blood-stained ECWs, it was bulging and humped and undulant.

And by then, Warren was running.

But not before he saw.

Saw dozens of jointed legs erupting from that gruesome face of pulp . . . coming out of the mouth and out of the eyes, wavering chitinous legs that

clicked and scraped free . . . interlocked spidery bodies moving just beneath the flesh. For the Beeman-thing was more than just a cannibalistic monster, it was an incubator.

Warren ran through the narrow winding crevice, the thing behind him giving chase with a resounding roar of absolute rage.

11

BY THE TIME HE made it back up to the Hypertat, Warren was shaking so badly he could barely open the door. And not just his hands, but his entire body. Rolling, spasmodic tremors ran through him like he was in the grip of a fever.

But it was no fever.

And it had very little to do with the cold.

This was the aftermath of sheer adrenaline-pumping terror and gut-deep horror, shock and revulsion and nerves strained to the point of fraying. He fumbled madly with the door latch and finally got it open and fell through the door, landing face-first in his cumbersome ECWs. He clawed his way to his feet, slamming the door. Locking it. He yanked off his mittens, the thermal gloves beneath, and stumbled over to the window.

Frosted.

Goddamn frost-free window was all frosted-up.

His teeth chattering, body quaking with tremors, fingers trembling, Warren went at the window like an animal, scraping the frost away with his numb fingertips. In the security lights he could see the other Hypertats lined up in a row like shoeboxes, the generator shack, storage sheds, the Skidoo snowmobiles hooked up to the electrical system to keep their block heaters warm.

That was all he saw other than shadows.

Clawing, reaching shadows.

Some nearly-extinct voice of reason in the back of his mind told him he was over the edge, hallucinating, maybe flat-out crazy by this point . . . but the shadows out there . . . they were not right. They moved and shifted, tangled and slithered across the blue ice walls.

He blinked it away, looking over at the mouth of the passage leading down to the cavern below.

He could not see the thing which he knew must be coming after him even now. He saw nothing and somehow that was the worst thing he could imagine. Because it was there and any moment now he would see it—a twisted grotesque shadow with bleeding eyes—come clambering up from below.

The snowmobiles.

Some crazy sense of self-preservation that was still treading water told him to pack up his gear, grab some equipment, and take off on one of the Skidoos. But that was insane. Take off to *where?* The nearest station was Polar Clime and that was at least a hundred miles over the Beardmore and plateau beyond at dead winter. It was fifty below out there, wind chills kicking it down to like minus seventy. He'd freeze to death on an open snowmobile even if he knew how to navigate the glacier and find the station in that blackness and blowing snow, which he certainly did not.

Face it, old man, you're done in and you know damn well you're done in. It ends here. In this ice cave. You'll die here. Alone. You'll never–

What in the Jesus was that?

He'd been reaching over to the radio, knowing that he had to get a Mayday out, when the noises started. Just like that night Biggs and he had heard them. A cycling cacophony of thuds and rumbling that seemed to be born far below but were getting closer with each rising beat. The lights in the Hypertat flickered. The screen on the laptop before him rolled black and stayed that way. Vibrations made the cave shake. Things trembled and fell, icicles dropped from the roof and smashed into fragments. The Hypertat was shaking, things rattling from shelves. The air was alive, supercharged with crackling static electricity, distant pinging and screeching noises that echoed and echoed.

No time left, no time.

Whatever was down there was much worse than just that thing that had murdered everyone, that fucking crawling incubator. Whoever it had been—Dryden or Stone or Kenneger or even Beeman himself—and whatever it now was, it paled next to what was waking up below.

Warren grabbed the radio headset and managed to get it on his head with his badly shaking fingers. He picked up the mic, dropped it. Picked it

up again and dropped it again.

C'mon!

In the back of his skull, a headache began to throb. His throat felt dry and his heart pounded relentlessly in his chest. He tried to speak into the mic, but his voice was raw and squeaking. Finally, he got it working and shouted into the mic: "MAYDAY! MAYDAY! MAYDAY! THIS IS ECHO INDIA CHARLIE ZERO! ECHO INDIA CHARLIE ZERO! EMPEROR ICE CAVE! BEARDMORE GLACIER! THIS IS A MAYDAY! REPEAT: THIS IS A MAYDAY! PLEASE RESPOND!"

Nothing came back at him but droning static, some electronic background noise, a low murmuring which he thought was probably the polar emptiness of the glaciers and mountains themselves.

"MAYDAY! MAYDAY! MAYDAY!" he tried again, sweat running down his face. "THIS IS A MAYDAY! IS ANYBODY FUCKING OUT THERE? CAN ANYBODY HEAR ME? TRANSMITTING MAYDAY TO MACOPS MCMURDO STATION!

PLEASE RESPOND! SOMEBODY! ANYBODY!"

The lights were flickering again, strobing as the power jumped in the lines. Through the window, he could see the security lights dimming and brightening. Shadows were moving everywhere now, spreading and pooling.

"LISTEN TO ME! I'M AT THE EMPEROR ICE CAVE, BEARDMORE GLACIER! CALL SIGN: ECHO INDIA CHARLIE ZERO!" he shouted against the rising din from outside. "EVERYONE'S DEAD! GOD, EVERYONE'S DEAD . . . I'M THE LAST ONE . . . THE LAST ONE . . . *IT'S HAPPENING NOW . . . THOSE THINGS ARE RISING UP. .. RISING UP–"*

The mic fell from his hand and he fell to his knees, panting and shaking, a shrilling squeal breaking loose inside his head and shattering his thoughts, making his eyes bulge and his face contort, drool run from his mouth in vile tangles.

Outside . . . dear God, outside . . .

A raging chaos of vibrations and hammerings, hissing static and metallic screeching. The lights were strobing, the temperature falling, everything flashing and flickering with rhythmic power surges. And cutting through it

all, a resounding booming and a deranged choir of screaming voices wailing and wavering and echoing. Millions of voices screaming out in eerie susurrations of torment.

And somehow, above the noise, Warren could hear that strident piping rising and falling and breaking up into sharp trilling and squealing sounds. And the Beeman-thing. Because it was out there now, too, letting loose with a guttural primeval shriek that Warren knew was his own name being called by an inhuman, monstrous voice.

Closer now.

Much closer.

Warren was beyond fear, he was beyond anything. There was only hatred and acceptance and defeat cycling down into nothingness. Ignoring the blossoming pain in his head, he pulled himself up to the radio and gripped the mic in palsied fingers. "LISTEN TO ME! WHOEVER'S OUT THERE! PLEASE LISTEN TO ME!" he breathed into the mic. "THEY'RE COMING NOW! THEY'RE COMING FOR ME! *DON'T COME AFTER ME . . . WHATEVER YOU DO . . . DON'T COME AFTER ME. .. DEAR GOD, DON'T COME TO THIS PLACE–"*

There was a sudden generation of crackling energy and the radio exploded with a shower of sparks, a gout of flames and smoke, a suffocating stink of melted plastic and fused circuitry.

Warren crawled across the floor on his hands and knees.

He did not dare look up at the window.

The Hypertat was in violent motion, filled with flickering blue light and smoke and heat and cold and a gagging intrusion of something that smelled like wet hides and spilled preservatives . . . acrid, overwhelming.

The door latch trembled.

Broke free.

The door was torn from its hinges and a freezing black shadow fell over Warren. Screaming, pressing his hands over his ears so he did not hear that profane musical piping sound, he looked up, seeing all the primal nightmares of his race standing there in that diabolical form before him. It was tall and conical, writhing vermiform appendages reaching out to him, a

stench of hot gas and iced ammonium blowing off it and burning his nostrils. He could hear the low, hollow suspiring of its breath. Hear the rubbery creaking of its wings unfolding.

Five red eyes looked down upon him.

With intensity.

A burning, blistering intensity.

And in Warren's mind, a single and pitiful voice of defiance: *Fuck you . . . fuck you . . . fuck you goddamn fucking–*

Then his mind pulled into itself, liquefying and running like hot tallow.

And the eyes.

Those accursed alien eyes.

Like suns going supernova.

This was the only glimpse he was allowed of the thing as his own eyes filled with blood, rupturing from pinpoint hemorrhages, finally exploding from their sockets like moist and rotting grapes. His hair boiled with smoke and his face swelled-up into a livid bruise, his teeth dropping from his bleeding gums.

And inside his skull, his brain superheated into a steaming soup of gray matter gone black and red and molten . . . and splashed out his ears.

12

POLAR CLIME
MARCH 17

ALL MORNING LONG AND well into the afternoon, the wind sounded like a lone wolf howling out some ancient song of mourning, its voice rising and falling but never fading away, just echoing off across the barren ice.

Time passed with a languid, unreal slowness.

It had been nearly two days since they killed the thing in T-Shack. Two long days. The atmosphere of Clime had steadily dissolved in that time, becoming blank and dim and fearsome. The shadows were thicker, the air pregnant with menace. And maybe some of that was some dire alien influence being directed at the station and its inhabitants, but a great deal of it was coming from within.

And that was more than enough.

13

ABOUT THREE THAT AFTERNOON, Koch started screaming.

He came running from C-corridor into the Community Room, absolutely hysterical. Coyle and Locke pretty much had to tackle him and he fought with enraged fury, his head whipping from side to side, froth on his lips.

Gwen got a hypo from Medical and shot him up with Thorazine and that brought him down after a few minutes.

"What happened?" Coyle asked him, but being that he had just come from C-corridor he could pretty much imagine.

"Butler," he said, his voice oddly thick and drawn-out. "She's . . . she's not human."

Gwen went off at this point to look in on their guest.

If things worked out right, they would be rid of Butler in a few hours. Special Ed had gotten through to Colony and they were coming for her.

"What were you doing in there?" Locke asked him. "You know what happens . . . why did you go in there?"

He shook his head. "I had to see . . . see for myself." Then he made a funny choking sound in his throat. "She's not human . . . just like they said . . . there's *something* inside her . . . something that can read your mind and make things move." Koch just laid there, breathing, eyes swimming in and out of focus. "It . . . it knows . . . knows all about you . . . it knew about my mother. *It knew how she died! When she died! And . . . and . . . and . . .*"

"Yes?"

Koch wiped sweat from his face and stared at the moisture on his palm like it was not just perspiration but maybe blood. "She told me . . . *told me that I would die down here . . .*"

His face was in his hands and it was hard to say if the noise he was making was laughter or sobbing, maybe both. "Oh God . . . oh God . . . oh

God . . . she's not human, man. She's a host for something. Something . . . something ancient, something evil. It knows the future, it knows the past."

14

IT STARTED WITH A rumbling and everyone in the dome heard it.

Wherever they were and whatever they were doing, they suddenly stopped.

Listened.

The phenomena was beginning again.

They all wanted to believe it was a storm gathering outside, making the dome shake as it did sometimes in the depth of winter, but this was different and they could all feel it right up their spines. No storm sounded like *this*. No storm ever exhaled a shrill screeching noise like metal tearing into metal that gradually rose in pitch until it was a shrieking, off-key almost musical piping that rode the howling winds and *became* the winds.

The dome was shaking.

The lights were flickering.

Some weird blue-white energy was arcing over the bulkheads.

A sudden and inexplicable rapping sound came from within the walls up and down the corridors. The floor was vibrating and the air filled with a scraping noise like forks drawn over blackboards.

Doors opened and slammed.

Ceiling tiles fell.

Computers crashed.

People screamed.

And that was how it started.

15

SPECIAL ED WAS IN his office when it happened.

He was going through his reports, trying in vain to find a way to put some spin on all the things that had happened and failing miserably. He tapped a few keys on his laptop and the screen went black then came back on . . .

. . . something around him shifted, changed.

Feeling a rising anxiety fanning out in his chest, he looked around, licking his dry lips. Sensing that something was suddenly missing or that something else was intruding that did not belong, he set down his cup of coffee . . .

. . . the hair rose on the back of his neck.

The pages of his notebook began to flutter as if in a wind. Locked filing cabinets began to slide across the floor, turning in slow circles. The chair he sat on began to move, gliding across the floor as if it were being pulled.

This is it, he thought in some dim back corner of his mind. *This is what we've all been waiting for and dreading. Here it comes.*

Breathing deeply and trying to convince himself that he was not utterly mad, he watched as things vibrated on his desk, dancing about: pens and pencils, clipboards and coffee cups, rubber bands and pads of sticky notes. Paper clips were ejected from the mouth of a cup like lava from the cone of a volcano. They scattered in the air, spinning around as if caught in some insane magnetic vortex. Papers flew and drifted down like a fall of Autumn leaves.

Gathering himself, refusing to listen to the triphammer beat of his heart, he reached for his coffee cup and it skipped away from him, thudding against the desktop. A crack ran up the side and it shattered into fragments. He reached for a set of desk scissors and they flew away from his fingers with incredible velocity, sinking into the wall a good two inches.

A cold and sickly-smelling sweat breaking out on his face, he found that he could not get out of his chair. He had no feeling beneath the waist.

Paralyzed.

Immobile.

His legs were cold rubber.

As his chair slid across the floor, he absolutely lost it, began to scream: "IN HERE! SOMEBODY HELP ME! I'M TRAPPED!"

Inside his head, he could hear the wailing, piping voices of the ghosts that were invading the station. Like October winds blown through deserted churchyards and funneled down drainage pipes, they moaned and echoed while he shook with terror.

16

GWEN STEPPED THROUGH THE door to Butler's room and right away saw Zoot crouched in the corner, her hand pressed over her mouth and her eyes wild with fear.

The dome was shaking. A picture of sunflowers on the wall one of the summer crew had left behind fell to the floor. Its glass face shattered . . . the tiny bits of broken glass blew over the floor like a down of drift.

Oh God, not again . . .

Butler was laying on the bed, staring at the ceiling. Her plate of food was untouched. Her IV of fluids was half-drained. Her eyes were glossy black pits.

Gwen went over to Zoot, kneeled by her, pulling her to her. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"Eyes," she said, her body rigid with terror.

"Eyes?"

"Red eyes. Five red eyes watching me."

Gwen swallowed, feeling her sanity fraying now as it had been for some time. *Eyes.* A delusion? A hallucination? She had spent too much time around Butler now to believe that. For even in her own dreams she had seen red eyes staring out of pockets of shifting blackness at her.

"These eyes watch you?"

Zoot nodded. "Ever since I saw the ghost."

"The ghost?"

"The ghost came out of Butler . . . it came out of her and it's been watching me. It won't let me leave. Everytime I go to the door, it knocks me back down." Zoot was breathing very heavily. "Right now . . ."

"Yes?"

She looked over at the closet door. "It's in there. That's where it watches me from. From inside the closet."

Gwen was going to tell her it was nothing, nothing at all, she just needed to get away from Butler, but as she reached out and touched Zoot to reassure her . . . something happened, something that floored her. Something that made her head spin and her teeth chatter and her belly come leapfrogging into her throat–"

"Gah," she said and it was a purely mindless animal grunt of violation. *"GAAAHHHHH–*

Like electricity.

Like grabbing a hot line, maybe a 220 sparking with juice.

Like laying your hands on it and feeling that energy come racing through you in a white-hot barrage, cooking your cells and making your brain flare-up with exploding fireworks . . .

Zoot.

Lynn Zutema.

She was from Iowa, unmarried, and had come to Antarctica because she wanted to get as far away from her family as possible. Her family were Seventh-Day Adventists and she'd been brought up under that restrictive yolk. When she turned eighteen, like a lot of kids who'd never enjoyed the freedoms most take for granted, she ran as fast and far away from the church as she could. The downside of that was that the Adventist elders had forbade her family from ever seeing or speaking to her again because she'd broke with their teachings.

I haven't seen or talked to my mom or dad in six years.

I don't think I ever will again.

My mom and dad are so brainwashed that they put the church before me.

Good riddance, I say.

Assholes.

. . . and then Gwen was back in her own head, knowing all the things that Zoot had never told her, all those messy private intimate details that

rotted her soul black and made her hurt. Zoot never truly came out of her shell at Clime . . . so Gwen had climbed inside it with her.

"GWEN!" Zoot was shouting. "GWEN!"

Gwen blinked and shook and it was over.

Around her, the whole station was pulsating with some building charge of energy. She could feel it up and down her arms.

And from the closet, she heard something scratching.

Something that wanted to get out.

17

THE GHOSTS.

They were everywhere.

As the station shook and the fluorescents above flickered, Coyle saw them coming right out of the walls. He was crouched there with Locke, both of them looking down at Koch, Ida standing over them . . . and then it started.

"Shit," Locke said under his breath.

The ghosts were shadowy, blurred . . . but not dark, Coyle saw.

No, they were white and leggy and tentacled, wings spreading out. The only color in them were those red, red eyes. They reminded him of blind, wriggling termites. He saw one, then two, three and four. Hideously bloated, white like corpses pulled from rivers, buzzing and piping, their assorted appendages coiling and uncoiling, reaching out and retracting.

He closed his eyes.

But when he opened them, they were still there.

Koch was screaming, but it seemed to come from a great distance.

He could feel the ghosts moving around him, reaching their elastic thoughts into his mind and he could not deny them. This was not how he had ever imagined being haunted must be like. Not in the least. This was not just spiritual or psychic, it was physical, organic, devastating.

The energy they emitted was cold and crawling like electricity, crackling and popping. He could feel it moving over the backs of his hands in flows and ripples. The hairs on his arms and at the back of his neck stood erect.

And throughout the dome, whatever had been building for so long now simply broke free.

18

THE IV BAG TREMBLED.

The fluid in it bubbled and bubbled, boiling now. As it did so, gases filled the bag. It inflated to the point of bursting and then it did, going with a wet popping and spraying juice in every direction.

Zoot rolled into a trembling ball.

Gwen let out a cry and stumbled towards the door.

Mere inches from it, it slammed shut.

She reached to grasp the knob and it was so hot it was like trying to grab a burning stove lid. She pulled away her hand with a cry.

She turned and Butler was sitting up in bed, staring at her.

The closet door rattled in its frame and exploded off its hinges.

19

IN HIS ROOM, HARVEY hid behind the desk when it started.

The haunting.

He could hear it all around him now and knew it was caused by that godawful witch they had shut up over in C-corridor.

Never should have came, I never should have came down here.

I knew it was a mistake.

I knew it was trouble.

I knew it was an ancient Pandora's Box filled with toxic darkness.

I knew.

I knew . . .

Antarctica was a cemetery.

A place where buried things routinely resurrected themselves. It was true and the imagery haunted him, made him squeeze his eyes shut and sink his teeth into his lower lip until he tasted blood.

Nausea boiled in his stomach.

He began to sweat and shake.

Butler was externalizing the evil within her and they were all going to pay for it now.

The air grew thick, frigid, it shivered like cool jelly.

Harvey closed his eyes, praying, as things flew off his desk in a whirlwind, shattering against the walls. There was a knocking at the frosty window that looked out into the compound. The blankets on his bed began to rustle, rising up in a hooded shape as if there was something beneath them.

He closed his eyes and remembered . . . remembered–

A house.

An empty house on the edge of town.

Back in Hooksett, New Hampshire, the town of his youth.

It was October and the air was crisp, tart, leaves blown over the broken walks and overgrown yard, patterns of frost shining in the dead grass. The house towered above him, a shadow cut from darker shadow, tree limbs scraping against the roof. It was just a two-story frame house. Nothing more. It was not some fabled Victorian monstrosity of the sort they used for cardboard Halloween decorations—rambling and boarded, grinning ghosts oozing from the crumbling chimney like vapors, bats circling the high, crooked turrets.

Just an ordinary house.

But what crawled through its belly was far from ordinary.

As a boy of eight, Harvey had braved the house and gone down to the cellar on a dare. One hour. Spend one hour in there.

And now as a man of sixty, he was there again.

Not in Antarctica.

But Hooksett.

It was absurd that he was shivering down in the dirty, dusty cellar, but he was. As a boy of eight, that hour had been terribly long. The cellar was dark, crowded with the menacing shapes of boxes and crates and old bedsprings. The house had groaned and creaked . . . but other than that, there was nothing.

No ghosts.

No disembodied voices.

The house was just empty and falling apart.

At least at first.

Then, then–

Something was there as he waited in the cellar, paralyzed with fear. Something was in the house just at it had been fifty years before.

Something sly.

Something nocturnal.

Something born in the black depths of the house and maybe in the blacker depths of a boy's fervid imagination.

And although he was in Antarctica and knew it, he could hear leaves falling outside and see pale moonlight coming in through a shattered window. The rafters overhead were hung with cobwebs. Things scratched in the walls. Something skittered over the back of his hand.

Something was rustling.

Like a sheet.

It was coming for him and he could hear the whisper of its shroud dragging down dusty corridors. Now it was at the cellar door. It creaked open. Now he could smell the thing: like motheaten rags locked in an attic trunk, like night and soil and dryrot.

It was coming for him.

It was coming to eat his soul.

20

A FOULNESS AND A DARKNESS swept out of the closet and permeated the room like a poison mist, filling its spaces with noxious disembodied shades and creeping shapes that swept about in a pall of freezing, howling wind. Zoot screamed and kept screaming.

Gwen tried to reach the door . . . and something like a hand thrust her back, dragging her over the floor and slamming her up against the wall.

The air was putrid with a stench of sweet rottenness that grew stronger and stronger, nauseous and warm, until it began to smell like vomit and feces.

Through dazed eyes, Gwen saw nightmare forms reeling about her like a living, phantasmagorical fog: winged alien shapes and fleshless skulls and shaggy forms that were nearly men. Gradually, the phantoms dissipated . . . but the unreal, evil atmosphere engulfing the room and bleeding from every crevice and corner did not.

"You're not going anywhere," Butler said in a scratching, dry voice. *"Not until I'm done with you."*

Zoot was shocked into a morbid silence.

Gwen stared at Butler.

Butler's face fanned out with a series of minute wrinkles like veins of frost settling into a window. Her face was so pallid it was nearly gray, bloodless and cracked-looking with all those intersecting wrinkles and lines. It looked like it would shatter if she smiled. But she did not smile because there was nothing in her capable of smiling. Her eyes were no longer green, they were black and empty and glistening. Pink scars at her temples stood out like blood against her deathly pallor.

"I know all about you, Gwen. I know what scares you."

Gwen crab-crawled across the floor, manic and whimpering.

The door was locked.

It was ice-cold.
She pounded on it.
She shouted.
And Butler's shadow fell across her.

21

WHEN THE ELECTRICAL SYSTEM on the big Cat 980 loader went dead while he was clearing drift, Frye knew something had gone to hell. Horn kept all the equipment running at peak efficiency and in all the years Frye had been behind the wheel of heavy equipment, he had never seen the lights on the panel flicker, then flash on and off before going totally dead.

He climbed down out of the cab and he heard the activity in the dome right away.

Sonofabitch.

Feeling the need for a weapon, he grabbed an iron ice chopper near the door, and entered the tunnel leading from D-corridor to CosRay.

When he got into D, he stopped dead.

The station was vibrating around him, the air electric with screeching noises and shrill, almost subsonic whining sounds. He saw someone at the end of D.

They were on their knees, rocking back and forth, clasping hands to the sides of their head as if they were in agony.

Hansen.

That's Hansen.

Frye raced towards him. When he was within ten feet of him, a blast of frigid air hit him, knocked him airborne, and threw him down the corridor.

The door to Biolab flew open and he expected to see some horror waiting there for him, but there was nothing, nothing at all. Frye got to his knees, wondering where his ice chopper was and . . .

. . . and a whipping, whistling wind suddenly came blowing out of Biolab with tornadic intensity. Everything in there was breaking and shattering, pulverized by an intense destructive force of pure kinetic energy . . . all of it getting sucked up in a wild, spinning torrent of debris that came blasting out

the door and right at him. He threw himself to the floor as broken glass and bits of metal, cracked plastic and wood shards hit him, peppering him like hail. In his parka and Carhartt overalls he was protected, shielded.

When it stopped, he sat up, glass falling from him.

He saw Hansen.

And he saw something else.

A form came right through the wall with crackling static electricity, a gray and ghost-white form that was phosphorescent and flickering, advancing on Hansen. It was more mist than solid and Frye could see the archway leading into the Community Room right through it.

He looked frantically for a weapon, anything . . . but how did you slay a ghost? How did you hurt something that seemed to have no true physical reality? He scrambled around on his hands and knees as a fierce wind blew down the corridor, scattering dust and detritus like a desert sandstorm.

. . . and the wraith came towards Hansen and Hansen screamed, but made no attempt to escape it. It was a human form that floated six inches off the floor, fingers reaching out like burning white wires, snapping and popping, a shocking white ectoplasmic mass that drifted in his direction, reaching for him, anxious to make contact . . .

. . . and that was when Frye saw *who* it was or *who* it had once been: Slim. There was no mistaking it. He was no longer human, no longer truly living in the accepted sense of the term . . . just some pulsating energized ghost that had left its tomb in a storm of agitated, burning particles. He was luminous and oscillating, caught in the churning maelstrom of his own unstable electromagnetic field, an ionized ghost . . . his eyes sunken hollow wormholes and his mouth nothing but a puckered, lipless, black sucking hole . . .

. . . then he took Hansen, not so much grabbing him but introducing him into his field which for Hansen was like taking hold of live current, seizing a high voltage line in his bare fists. The result was instantaneous: he lit up like a Christmas bulb as if he were introduced to a massive charge of x-rays . . . for one second he guttered with blinding light and his skeleton was visible through the flesh . . . then he seemed to shrink, to curl up like a dead worm, to fold in on himself and blacken . . .

. . . he hit the floor, breaking apart like dry soot that was scooped up and scattered by the wind . . .

. . . and the wraith turned towards Frye, moving in his direction with blue-white pulsations of arcing energy. Frye watched it come, floating towards him. Those eyes deeper, the mouth wider, a howling noise coming from it as it created a vortex of suction, pulling everything towards it in a raging tempest . . .

. . . Frye saw that it had more substance now, that it had gained a measure of physical solidity from feeding and draining Hansen, maybe tapping right into his lifeforce and sucking him dry like a leech. And now it wanted more . . .

. . . and Frye knew that the only thing he could do was die with a measure of defiance and that's what he planned on doing. He found his ice chopper, clutching the iron shaft in his hand, and stood his ground. The vacuuming force from the wraith was immense and irresistible . . .

. . . as it grew nearer and his flesh crawled with minute static charges, he saw the face of Slim had become a twisted, seamed root, a malevolent vulpine mask of absolute wrath, absolute pain, and absolute hunger . . .

. . . Frye staggered towards it because he really didn't have a choice . . . it pulled him in and he went, raising the ice chopper over his head like a primitive preparing to kill a mastodon, shielding his eyes with one hand, gasping a final breath, and throwing his makeshift weapon right at it.

He thought it would go cleanly through him.

But it did not.

It impaled him, punching a hole through him and connecting with the floor and there was a resounding *boom,* a flash of light, churning smoke, and a surge of force that put Frye right on his ass . . . an easy fifteen feet from where he'd last been standing.

Every light in the corridor blew out.

Slim was gone.

There were only a few burning fragments drifting in the air and a sharp stink of burnt wiring.

That was it.

Frye just sat there, dazed.

The iron . . . the iron ice chopper.

Iron conducts electricity.

Yes, it connected Slim to the floor and ground him out like a high voltage line, discharging him, bleeding the power right out of him.

22

THE GHOSTS GATHERED AROUND him, circling, circling, pale shades and demonic memories parading around him like magic lantern spooks cast against walls.

Not just spirits, but fleshy-white things that he could feel and smell. They stank of ammonia, of caustic chemicals.

Battered by their force, Coyle with Locke at his heels threw himself at the door where Butler was being housed.

He could hear Zoot scream.

Gwen shouting.

He kept ramming the door with everything he had until it burst open.

23

GUT THOUGHT: *MY SOUL is being eaten by monsters from the mist.*

And she did not even know if she had thought that or *they* had placed it in her mind. But it was there, echoing into silence, and she knew it was true even if she did not completely understand what it meant.

The ghosts pressed in closer, so close that not only could she smell their sharp alien odors, she could actually *feel* them. Feel those scratching limbs and coiling appendages touching her, stroking her, feeling her.

Dry and gossamer like living cobwebs.

Then all around her, they began to melt into one another until they were nothing but a great oozing patch of fog that hovered about.

And that's when she knew.

That's when she realized that they were plugged into Butler like a TV is plugged into a wall socket. Without the socket, the TV is a dead hunk of plastic and metal. And without Butler, these ghosts, these memories, were nothing more than that: memories, potential lacking a catalyst to set them free.

Butler powered them.

Butler was the generator and the amplifier.

And if a machine annoys you or troubles you, you need only disconnect it from its power source. If Butler was dead, then the ghosts would fade into nothingness.

Grinning with lunacy, Gut reached into the top drawer of her desk and pulled out a letter opener with a sharp five-inch blade. She would kill the witch and set the station free.

She charged through the ethereal wall of ghosts and it was like passing through damp, cloying sea-mist.

Then the knife in her hand began to tremble.

It went red hot and flew from her hand.
Gut crawled off like a whipped dog.

24

WHEN COYLE CAME THROUGH the door a wave of force hit him and knocked him to the floor. He found his feet, but he could not get to Gwen. Each time he tried, a great freezing wind hit him in the face with such impact he nearly went down again.

The room stank: hot, spoiled, and mephitic.

The stink was unbearable. It was like Chelsea Butler was not alive, but dead, festering and putrid. She opened her mouth and a spray of black liquid came out, dotting her white face in the wind with tiny dark spots like ink.

And when she spoke, her voice had a wavering, windy sound like a November gust playing around the eaves: *"Thee have been named, Nicky Coyle, thee have been named and selected . . ."*

"Shut up, witch!" Gwen cried out. "Shut up!"

Two glass cabinets shattered and Butler floated across the floor, the sheets sliding off her like a shroud. She stood there, something trickling from between her legs and the stink of urine was unmistakable.

Locke rushed at her and nearly had hold of her.

Then she looked at him and he flew against the wall.

She licked her gray lips and turned towards Gwen. *"Fear, fear, fear me! Your kind fear the truth! By design, my little whore, by design! How easy to manipulate little minds with the added leverage of fear, of terror . . ."*

"Get away from her," Coyle managed to say, standing up and showing her that he was not scared. It was not true, but he would not flinch from what she was: a discarnate, crawling pestilence.

"Fear me," she said, rising up, towering over him, smelling and fetid, the piss still running from her. Yellow saliva ran from the corners of her mouth. Her eyes were not black now, but red shot through with black metallic specks. And now, now they were bright . . . vivid red, glowing in her pale and seamed face.

He screamed at the sight of them and not because of their awfulness, but because he *knew* those eyes. He had seen them in a dream. A childhood nightmare. Those eyes drifting in darkness, taking him places he had never wanted to go . . . black cyclopean cities and cosmic voids.

"No, no, no!" Zoot shouted, knowing what he was thinking. *"Don't remember! Don't remember those eyes and those terrible places! You're not supposed to remember the coming of the swarm! Where they took us, what they did to us in and out of those black holes–"*

25

IN THE GALLEY, CUPBOARDS opened and silverware was ejected from drawers.

The Beav was crouched in a corner, sobbing.

They were coming for her.

Shadows drifting from some cosmic graveyard.

They would take her to the city.

Into the darkness.

The agony, oh, the agony.

The alien ghosts were rising and falling, slinking around her like hungry cats looking for something to chew and worry. And it was not flesh and blood, but minds, minds that they glutted themselves on.

They were here.

Psychic vampires. Mental cannibals.

They stuffed themselves with fear and filled their bellies with the raw, bleeding tissue of insanity. Nausea spread out in her belly as the air around her grew leaden, the atmosphere putrefying and going noxious like milk souring.

Ghosts, everywhere ghosts.

They are not ghosts as such, she thought as they closed in. *They are memories. Memories of those things that everyone talks about. Ancient, dire memories that infest Antarctica like maggots infest bad meat. This continent is a cemetery, the world's oldest cemetery. It's like some rock you turn over in a field, the underside squirming with insects. Except here it is not insects, the infestation is something much more primeval, something incalculably dangerous and diabolical . . .*

They reached out to claim her.

26

CRAWLING ON HIS HANDS and knees down D-corridor after escaping the psychic maelstrom of the CosRay Lab, Eicke trembled and shook, sweat beading his face and running down his cheeks.

D was pitch black. The lights were gone.

Butler.

Butler is the witch.

She has called up ghosts to haunt you.

To haunt everyone.

Like a hunted animal, the station thrumming around him, Eicke pulled himself to his feet, running, stumbling. He put out a hand to the wall to steady himself and received a jarring static shock that put him back to the floor.

Ghosts.

He saw ghosts.

Malignant, alien ghosts coming up the corridor.

Eicke squeezed his eyes shut. He would not see them. He refused to see them.

This was an avoidance technique, he knew, that often helped those afflicted by grotesque hallucinations. He closed his eyes, breathed in and out, counted slowly in his mind, telling himself that no, no, there were not specters in the corridor with him, squirming and drifting, white alien insects with baleful red eyes. Antarctica was just like you saw it on the Discovery Channel or National Geographic Explorer: a pristine wilderness of frozen white wastes. It was not a graveyard, not some looming ice-clotted haunted house whose shattered walls spilled nefarious spirits and the diseased blood of nightmares.

He opened his eyes and the ghosts were upon him.

He curled into a ball and they passed right through him with a blast of freezing air.

Butler!

She is a witch and you know she is a witch. A monster. An absolute monster that has called up demons from the ravening pits and ice-sealed tombs of this ancient land to torment you. To torment everyone.

We're all going to die.

To die . . .

Die . . .

27

THE PIPING VOICES . . . THE SCREAMS . . . THE screeching noises . . . the buzzing and thrumming sounds. They all heard them gathering strength and felt them amping up to some nameless crescendo. They were sharp and hot and cutting as they sheared through brains, trampling down things like defiance and refusal to answer the siren call of the hive, the mighty and ancient hive.

They were powerless before its intensity.

It owned minds and sapped the strength from bodies.

It was taking them, converting them, powering up ancient imperatives and controls using Butler as a conduit, a living wire through which the song of the hive was transmitted.

They were being crushed.

Drained.

Destroyed.

But there is a limit to human endurance and just as the energy neared its apex, Butler seized her own head in her hands and began to contort wildly, limbs quaking, head snapping back and forth on her neck. She hit the floor and crawled out into the corridor, her body trembling with what looked like epileptic seizures.

Then she fell forward face-first and did not move.

28

THE PHENOMENA STOPPED.

Like flicking a light switch, it ceased.

From beginning to end, no more than fifteen minutes.

Coyle got Gwen and Zoot to their feet and led them out of the room. Locke followed. Everyone was shocked and confused, their heads thrumming with aches and pains. People wandered in from the Community Room. Some came running. One of them was Horn who'd been out in the Heavy Shop for most of it.

"What the hell's going on?"

"Get some rope," Coyle said. "Hurry."

"What are we going to do? Tie her up?"

He nodded. "Yeah. Then we're going to throw her ass out in the snow and let her freeze to death. There's no other way."

Frye and Horn came back with a couple coils of rope.

Within five minutes, they had Butler trussed up. It was a pathetic spectacle but there seemed to be no other alternative. By that time, the entire crew had gathered.

"We're just going to let her die?" Zoot said.

"It's her or us, honey," Gut said.

Nobody could argue with such flat logic.

Butler was naked, roped-up like a steer. Ropes crisscrossed her chest and waist and throat and were tied off to a loop that noosed her wrists together. Her legs had been left free so she could walk, but that was about it. She was weak and pale, practically emaciated, her eyes rolling in their sockets like glazed marbles. She was breathing very hard like she couldn't catch her breath.

Coyle felt sick to his stomach. It was pathetic.

"Maybe freezing her ain't enough," Gut said.

"It's more than enough," Special Ed said. "Maybe more than we dare do."

But Gut had that gleam in her eye. "We ought to burn her."

"That's sick," Gwen said.

Coyle shook his head. "Burn her for chrissake? What is this? The Middle Ages? Offer her up to Jehovah and Porky the Pig and the others gods of protection?"

"Fuck you, Nicky," Gut said.

"Let's go," Frye said. "Sooner we get this bitch on ice, the better."

They half-carried and half-dragged her down the corridor. She fell to her knees about six feet before she reached the archway leading into the Community Room.

"Get that witch on her feet!" Gut snapped.

Coyle was beginning to have second thoughts about it all. She was deadly, yes. She was dangerous, yes. Yet . . . she was a woman no matter what had taken hold of her. To leave her out in the snow, Jesus, that amounted to cold-blooded murder. He didn't know if he could be part of that and judging from the looks in the eyes of the others, he didn't think they liked the idea so much either.

Butler fell again.

Coyle felt a chill race through his entire body.

Too late, too late, he thought. *We lost our window.*

Butler stood up and everyone fell back and away from her . . . and that's when things *really* started to happen.

She had been kneeling on the floor like a girl at church saying her prayers . . . and now she rose up, inflating, growing larger, a change coming over her that everyone felt. The electricity in the air was fluid and arcing suddenly. Moments ago, it had been charged with a static, potential negativity and now Butler had drained it dry and filled herself with it. Gorging on that negative voltage like a leech on blood.

The hag was back.

And she was pissed.

Coyle felt an ominous wave of evil pass through him. An evil that was immense and cosmic. It blew through him like a shade, sucking the vitality from his organs and making him want to wilt and curl-up like a dead flower.

Right away, the walls began to vibrate and shake.

The beams overhead groaned as if an immense weight had settled onto them. The air was filled with those piping and squealing noises, peals of crackling energy that made the hairs stand up on the back of his neck. As he heard and felt these things, he was instantly overwhelmed by a crazy feeling of exhilaration which had nothing to do with excitement or anticipation and everything to do with Butler and the raw kinetic energy coming off of her in waves.

Coyle was plugged right into it and it made his heart leap and pound with a crazy booming rhythm.

Ida screamed.

Locke dropped to his knees.

Frye and Horn just stood there, shocked into inaction. Which was pretty much what Harvey and The Beav were doing. As for the others, there really wasn't much they *could* do. Save watch the show and it was turning out to be a real dandy.

Butler's body was shriveled and gray, a skeleton stretched with skin. The ropes that enclosed it frayed and burst open and she drifted up five, six inches off the floor like a party balloon. Her eyes were huge and blankly white, lacking pupils. Her lips shrank away, revealing blackened gums and those narrow yellow teeth which chattered incessantly.

The air was not just cold, it was glacial.

Coyle could feel his limbs numbing, feel the wind that came off her biting into his face like frozen needles. But it was not crisp or clean, but oddly heavy and suffocating as if the oxygen had been sucked from it. She hovered there, turning in a slow lethargic circle like a corpse on a gallows, the wind blowing from her in icy sheets, frayed ribbons of rope snapping around her. The wind stank like spilled bleach and leaking tanks of formaldehyde. The odor was violently sharp and nauseating.

Coyle's eyes were watering as his lungs gasped for air.

Special Ed and Ida hit the floor. Harvey and The Beav followed like dominoes, as if they were miners that had just inhaled poison gas. They hit the floor, gagging and whimpering. Koch let out a high, hysterical scream and dropped down to his knees. His fingers were blistered and smoldering. The stink of cremated flesh was unbearable. He'd been brandishing an ice-axe that suddenly glowed red hot in his hands . . . it hit the floor and melted into a bubbling pool of metal.

You could feel the energy in the air cycling up, thrumming and crackling, as blue eddies of juice ran up and down Butler's body with a stink of fused electrical wiring.

"Somebody do something!" Gut cried out, trying to get to her feet, and something invisible hit her right in the midsection with such force she folded-up, the breath knocked from her.

She's going to kill us all, Coyle thought while he still could think. *She's going to turn up the volume all the way this time and level the fucking station . . .*

Both Frye and Horn collapsed.

The energy coming off Butler was wild, but undirected. It went in every direction in waves of force and heat and vibration. Several people were knocked around. Locke was thrown into Special Ed. The lights flickered overhead and a pipe burst, spraying water that froze almost instantly in the sub-zero gale coming from Butler. A cyclone started in Gwen's room and everything in there that wasn't tied down— clothing and blankets, water bottles and papers and trash from the can—came spinning out the door and spilled into the corridor like the room had just thrown up. The door slammed with such force that it was nearly split in two. The paint on the walls steamed and superheated, curdling and bubbling. Nails were ejected from studs and the plasterboard fanned out with huge, gaping cracks.

There was nothing anyone could do.

Frye and Horn were blown into the Community Room, tumbling like kids down a park hill, knocking aside Eicke like a nine pin, and that's when the corridor became a wind tunnel of roaring, vacuuming noise that hit with the force of a hurricane. The cacophony was deafening. Everything was flying and spinning in a tornado of screeching wind.

Coyle hunkered down the best he could, squinting his eyes against the blow. The lights were strobing on and off, the air a tempest of dust and ice crystals, nails and flakes of paint, papers and chips of wood. The corridor was not just flying apart, but flaking away, eroding.

He saw Locke get sucked into the storm and get thrown thirty feet down the corridor. Special Ed and Ida followed in his wake. The Beav was lifted five feet into the air and bounced off the walls. Coyle himself was blown down the hallway, striking Gwen, then both of them rolled right into Zoot.

They ended up in a merry little heap.

The three of them were twined together, knotted up and compressed into one another like a jumble of pilots who had been smashed together by too many G's. Just a living hodgepodge of legs and arms and bodies. And Coyle had never, ever thought for one moment in his life that he would find it unpleasant to be married to two attractive women in such a way, but it *was* unpleasant. Unpleasant because that force was still on them and he could not move. And unpleasant because he figured he was about to die and the worst part of that was he would have to hear Gwen and Zoot dying with him. And that was more than he could take.

The station was coming apart.

The ceiling was falling around them, the walls rupturing. Things were falling and flying, cutting them and bruising them and banging into them and all the while they were sandblasted with debris and dirt, papers and plaster dust and fine scathing paint chips.

And through that violent rushing storm of deafening noise and flying clutter, he could hear those rhythmic pulsating noises that rattled the entire station and threatened to bring it down around them. And buried in it, those shrill piping cries which were the shrieking voices of the Old Ones and a manic buzzing which must have been their wings, the sound of the swarm itself.

Butler hovered harmlessly in the storm like a moth before a lit window.

But she was no longer Butler or anything like Butler: she was a wraith, a corpse-hag, a rawboned mummy that had clawed its way from a sandy tomb. Tiny lines like cracks in fine porcelain had fanned over her face, connecting into a maze of wrinkles and ruts and deep-hewn seams. Strips of

flesh blew around like loose bandages. Her black lips split open, shearing away from her mouth to expose pitted gums. A series of tiny blood blisters erupted over her body and swelled to the size of hen's eggs, each bursting with a spray of black bile.

Her voice pierced the wall of noise, a scraping of dry metal: *"Named! Thee have all been named since before thy birth! Before the birth of thy race! Old, old, old beyond time! God will not be the one that calls of thee! For thee is thrice named by the devils of old! Gather in their name and give unto them that which is theirs . . . and theirs alone! Gather, children, gather for ye harvest! Flesh and blood and soul and spirit! Taken aloft, shall ye be, into the hollow places and the dark spaces in-between!"*

And Coyle knew he had been named as they all had been named.

Named by those who had brought forth life and substance upon the barren face of primordial Earth. Something in him raged against the idea, but something much older accepted it and he lowered his head and waited to be harvested, lain low by an intellect that was omnipotent and ancient and unspeakably malignant.

He looked in Butler's direction and saw her left eye expand like a helium balloon, shattering the orbit around it, distending until it was the size of a softball. Then it exploded with a spray of tissue, the right eye following suit. And what was left were blackened, empty sockets from which tendrils of blood floated like red lucid wires, held in stasis by the airless pocket cycling around her. But deep back in those sockets, there was a cold scarlet glow . . . and he knew it, recognized it. It was the red river of communal sacrifice and he felt the draw of its bitter shadowy waters where he would drown and twist as the light in him, the drive and purity and soul, was leeched from his skull and he was extinguished.

Then . . . the goons from Colony showed.

Coyle, like the others, was pretty much out of it by then. The roaring wind and storm of debris and cycling energy had not dissipated in the least. In fact, it was still rising and expanding like the storm waters of the alien hive itself which would soon drown the world.

The lights overhead did not go out.

They simply dimmed as they were drained dry of electricity and vanquished, exploding in showers of sparks and glass. Flashlight beams cut through the howling murk. Dayton had arrived with three troopers to pick up Butler and all of them were knocked instantly on their asses. His men went down firing their MP5 machine guns from the hip, bullets ripping into the walls and ricocheting wildly. Dayton himself struggled against the tempest, shouting out orders that were never heard.

The Butler-thing drifted towards him, an absolute mummy now, eroding and flaking into a great whirlwind of debris that swarmed over her skeleton like a hive of angry bees. *"Die!"* said her broken, wavering voice that seemed to come from distant, echoing leagues. *"All die! Give up that which is asked! A burnt offering–"*

How he did it, even he did not know. But as she bore down on him and flattened him with a barrage of cold energy, the 9mm Beretta Model 92 in his gloved hands went off and three bullets drilled into her skull, blowing it into fragments.

The wall nearest her was blown out, vaporized into a billowing steam and a great final wind tore down the corridor . . . and then it ended. There was nothing but debris and ruins and scattered bodies. The icy cold vanished and there was the sound of dripping water.

And the moaning of voices in the dusty darkness.

29

WHEN THEY PULLED THEMSELVES from the wreckage, they were banged-up, bruised, sore, and more than a little in shock. But they were all alive. Dayton's men helped them into the Community Room and slowly everyone came to their senses.

C-corridor was literally gutted.

The walls were collapsed, the sheet metal behind them mangled and twisted. The ceilings were ripped open, broken pipes and wiring hanging down like fractured bones and severed arteries. The good thing was, the integrity of the dome structure itself was undamaged. The bitter cold and wind had not gotten in.

After Dayton had inspected everyone for damage, he ordered his men to pick through the debris and gather up what they could find of Butler. Her bones, blackened and pitted and entirely fleshless, were scattered the length of the corridor. They put what they found in a vinyl body bag. Some of the bones were still smoldering.

Finally, Dayton pulled Coyle aside, said, "These are, for all intents and purposes, your people now, Coyle. Watch them. Guard them. Things are going to start happening now. Things worse than you've seen so far. Do you understand what I'm saying to you?"

Coyle swallowed. "Yes."

"The world as we understand it will now begin to dissolve and you have to be ready. What was laid down and planned out long ago will begin in earnest. Are you ready for that?"

"I guess I don't have a choice."

"No, you don't. None of us do."

They stood there, looking at each other, and maybe even understanding each other. Finally, Coyle said, "Butler showed up here two months after she

disappeared at Mount Hobb. Why? Did she come from Colony? Was she sent here on purpose?"

Dayton sighed. "Listen to me, Coyle. When I met you out at that crash site you didn't like me. Correct?"

"Correct."

"You thought I was some gung-ho, flag-waving asshole. Maybe I am. But what your boys saw in the wreckage . . . that *carcass* was dangerous. I had to contain it immediately. It caused the crash, it killed the pilot. I had to get your asses out of there pronto so you didn't all suffer the same fate." Dayton shook his head. "I've always followed orders. I never questioned those orders . . . but lately . . . well, things have changed. To answer your question, there are two groups at Colony actively opposing one another—one faction that is partially responsible for many things going on down here and many things that have happened in the past and another faction that actively opposes the first in any way they can. By any means. Do you understand?"

Coyle did. He was trying to tell him many things without actually saying them. "And your loyalties have shifted? You throw in with that second faction?"

"Yes. Absolutely. We're attempting some damage control but it might be too damn late. It was this second faction that sent us out to contain the crash site . . . the first faction *wanted* your crew to retrieve the carcass and if you had, it would have been Kharkov all over again. Those same people were responsible for Butler showing up here and for another *entity* you took care of, I understand."

"That thing . . . it killed several people. It wiped out NOAA Polaris."

"It's doing what it was designed to do—thin any opposing force and spread fear and paranoia."

"What the hell was that thing?"

"We call it a *Creeper,* the beakers at Colony call them *Proto-Spawn.* They were engineered by the aliens from a much older life form, the oldest life form on the planet save the aliens themselves."

"Shoggoth?" Coyle asked.

Dayton ignored that. "Now . . . I told you some things I shouldn't have. I want your trust and I want your help. Tomorrow we're going up to the Emperor Cave. Nobody's heard from them in days. Somebody's got to go up there. That somebody is me. We're going to sort out the menace up there. You think you can spare yourself and a couple more of your crew to come along?"

Coyle's first reaction was to decline because his people had already been through so much, yet he was starting to like Dayton. And the idea of striking back against the alien dominance was very satisfying.

"All right," he finally said. "How we getting up there? It's quite a pull."

"Chopper. A specially-rigged Icewolf that can handle the conditions down here. Ten-hundred hours we pick you up."

"We'll be ready."

"It's gonna be rugged," Dayton warned him. "Pick the right people. You want to see what the Creeper was developed from? Tomorrow you'll get a chance."

Dayton and his men left then, making for the Sno-Cat outside that had brought them. For a long time, Coyle stood around wondering if he had just made a terrible mistake.

What was laid down and planned out long ago will begin in earnest. Are you ready for that?

He figured he was ready.

As ready as anyone could be for the end of the world.

But before any of that came down, they had to put the station back in order and that was priority one. And the amazing thing was, everyone chipped in. No cliques. No bullshit. That was all done now. Butler had broken that all up and now they were working together. It took a few hours to set things as right as they were going to be that night.

Nobody questioned what had to be done even when Hansen's remains were swept up.

30

EMPEROR CAVE,
BEARDMORE GLACIER
MARCH 18

DESOLATION TROUGH WAS LIKE the Grand Canyon drowned in ice.

From above, during the summer when there was light to see by, it looked as if the Beardmore had cracked open like an eggshell right to its glacial core. But in the winter, in the darkness and cold, it looked more like a vault, a great jagged burial pit that had no bottom.

And down there, in that polar void, was a howling devastation beyond imagination. The frozen winds of the Queen Alexandra Range were funneled downward by the conical peaks of Mount Wild where they rushed through the Trough, turned back upon themselves by the titanic barrier of the Cerberus Icefalls which was like a cork in a bottle. This created a frightful vortex of blowing drift, enshrouding ice fog, and a howling subzero wind that roared and rumbled, cutting right through anything living like frozen knifeblades.

The Icewolf barely made it down into the Trough without crashing into the walls of the glacier itself, savage headwinds tearing at it and trying to slap it from midair. When it set down, it bounced, shook wildly, then bounced again before coming to rest with a resounding thud that nearly knocked everyone out of their seats.

Then the door was open and Coyle and the others pushed out into a rushing whirlpool of white nothingness. The wind was screaming at nearly fifty miles an hour, flashlight beams revealing a gutted, pitted ice-scape of ridges, yawning hollows, and jagged escarpments of blue ice. It looked like the dark side of the moon, remote and desolate and eerie with lashing sheets

of drift and jumping shadows, that wind moaning like a banshee the whole time.

Fucking hell on Earth, is what Coyle thought.

It made the plateau almost look cozy.

Emperor Cave was some two-hundred feet ahead, but in that weather it might as well have been ten miles. Dayton formed them into a chain with himself out front, his troopers—Long, Reja, McKerr, Norrys, and Barnes—in the back, Coyle and Gwen and Horn in the middle. They were roped together as they pushed over the seamed, craggy ice and that was so that if anyone went into a crevasse, the others could yank him or her out. But truth be told, in that wind and darkness, if one went in, they were *all* going in.

The temperature was sixty below and they all wore goggles against the constant onslaught of snow and ice particles scraped from the glacier itself. Even with their ECWs on, parka hoods zipped tight, balaclavas pulled down, the wind was unbearably frigid.

You could lose yourself in ten paces in this, Coyle thought, *and freeze up tight in fifteen minutes. Whose goddamn idea was this in the first place?*

But he knew the answer to that one, all right. He'd volunteered just as Horn and Gwen had. Frye and Locke had wanted to come, too, but they drew the short straws.

They pushed on through wind and ice fog and then Dayton stopped, called out as loud as he could: "There! There it is!"

Coyle couldn't see it at first.

Even their flashlight beams only made it five or ten feet before being reflected back by the storm. He followed behind Dayton and then, rising out of that turbulent murk . . . a circle of light above them, the mouth of Emperor Cave. From their position out in the storm, they could see that the power was still on because inside the cave it was glowing with a blue-green phosphorescence. That meant the generator was still chugging along and it also meant somebody might still be alive in there.

There had been eight. Three scientists—Dryden, Stone, and Kenneger—two contract workers, Warren and Biggs, and a couple of engineers, Reese

and Paxton. The eighth man was a Navy lieutenant-commander named Beeman.

Steel poles had been driven into the ice with bright red nylon rope threaded through them as a guyline. They led from the bottom of the sheer ice slope which canted at a mean sixty degrees all the way up to the mouth of the cave which was about a hundred feet above. Not an endearing prospect in the weather.

Dayton started up and his daisy chain followed.

The wind was vicious all the way and it was a matter of pulling themselves up hand over hand and it was painfully slow. And as they climbed, their Stabilicer cleats digging into the smooth face of the glacier, the entrance of the Emperor got nearer and nearer and larger and larger until it loomed above like some yawning blue mouth. Coyle estimated that mouth to be sixty feet across and at least fifty from floor to roof. Amazing.

About thirty feet up, Gwen lost her footing and slid into Horn who stumbled into the troopers behind him. Coyle's first indication of that was when the rope tying him to her snapped tight. For a moment there, the wind punching into them with what seemed typhoon force, it seemed that they were all going to go tumbling down in a merry heap. And they would have had it not been for the superior conditioning of Dayton and his men who dug in and held the line while Gwen and the others finally found their feet and got their cleats into the ice again.

Gripping the rope above with one hand and putting his flashlight right in their faces, Dayton cried out: "Watch what the fuck you're doing back there!"

Coyle heard Gwen call out, "What?" because the wind was so loud you couldn't hear much unless you were right on top of someone.

Up they went, the wind blasting into them, the guyline snapping wildly, ice-covered and slippery. Finally they made it up to the mouth, one after the other appearing out of the snow-clotted murk.

"Okay," Dayton called out. "Get ready for the shit."

And maybe the others hadn't heard him, but Coyle heard him just fine.

31

EMPEROR ONE

THE MAIN SHAFT LEADING into the mouth turned off to the right and opened into a sheltered grotto of shimmering blue ice that was enormous, a worm hole cut right into the belly of the glacier itself. The walls were made of carven flows, runnels, and rivers of ice that looked like melted candle wax, the arched ceiling above a jagged expanse of thousands of icicles like spears waiting to fall. All of it was sparkling with a refracted blue-green light that was at once dazzling and spectral.

"It's almost . . . beautiful," Gwen said.

Horn grunted. "Yeah, lovely."

Coyle listened for signs of life but heard only a gravelike silence that was broken by the hum of the generator and the cracking of the glacier itself.

The security lights made everything glow, created crawling shadows and pockets of night. Just ahead were four Hypertats lined up like coffins. Only one was lit up. As Dayton's men went to check out the generator and the numerous storage sheds and shacks, Dayton led Coyle and the others towards the Hypertats over the rippling ice.

"Let's see what this clusterfuck is all about," he said.

Coyle only knew what he had heard and what Dayton had told him. The Emperor Cave site was occupied that winter by a Navy-sanctioned scientific team studying the guts of the glacier. They had reported finding some sort of specimen in the ice and then nothing . . . just a garbled Mayday from one of the team members that everyone was dead.

That's all Coyle knew, or at least all Dayton was telling him, but he figured it was enough. *A specimen in the ice.* Well, that spoke volumes. It brought to mind the Kharkov Tragedy and the macabre events that had transpired since and long before. *They chopped something from the ice, only it probably wasn't as dead as it should have been.* He followed behind Dayton,

their flashlight beams filled with suspended ice crystals, everyone's breath coming out in frosty clouds that dissipated very slowly.

As they moved forward through the unreal, sepulchral silence, Coyle felt it begin to take hold of him: the fear. It flooded through him and settled in his belly in a solid, shifting mass. An atavistical terror that was labyrinth and deep-set, an ancient network of alarm.

Gwen gripped his arm suddenly and he jumped.

"You feel it, too, don't you?"

"Yes," he said.

The menace was almost electric, agitated and cycling to life as if their coming here had flipped some switch and turned on some ancient machine of phobic dread and malignity. The atmosphere was noxious and shivering.

But at least they were out of the wind and it wasn't quite as cold in here. And they were armed. That was a good thing. Dayton's men had flamethrowers, grenades, submachine guns and sidearms. He had given Coyle and Horn military-issue SPAS-12 assault shotguns and Gwen a Beretta 9mm handgun, the Model 92 automatic. But down here, in this awful place, Coyle had to wonder if it was enough.

Ahead, he saw a row of Skidoos hooked up to block heaters. He wondered what they were for just as he wondered, really, what all this was about. A winter deep-field project like this. Glaciology? Yeah, right.

Long came running up, crunching over the ice. "Generator is running fine," he said. "Plenty of fuel. But she's auto-feed, could run for weeks on her own until the tanks dry-up."

Only one of the Hypertats was lit up and this is where they went. As they came around the side, Reja called out: "Captain . . . over here."

Here we go, Coyle thought.

He followed Dayton around the side of the Hypertat and Reja and Barnes were standing there in their olive drab polar suits, weapons pointed up. The other men were rushing over.

A body.

The door to the Hypertat hung from one hinge, looked like it had been hit with incredible force.

And just inside, sprawled on the floor, was the corpse.

A man in ECWs, his body contorted and back arched as if from some horrible convulsion. But the worse thing was his face which was just grotesque: mouth seized open in a scream, hollow eye sockets filled with crystallized blood, tissue and blood and slime splashed down from those sockets in a grisly caul. All of it frozen into icicles that grew from his face to the floor like melted tallow.

"Shit," Horn said.

Gwen looked away, but then looked back again. "What happened to him?" she said. "What could do that to him . . . blow his eyes out like that?"

But nobody ventured a guess.

"It's Warren, I think," Dayton said. "One of the contract guys. Must've sent out that Mayday and then . . . and then . . ."

"Then what?" Gwen demanded.

Coyle was staring at the corpse. The heater was running inside the Hypertat, but with the door wide open the body had iced-up. He was thankful for that, thankful that the subzero temperatures of Antarctica always reduced dead things to shriveled ice sculptures. He didn't want to think what the body might have smelled like otherwise.

"You check the other Hypertats?" Dayton said.

"Empty. All of 'em," Barnes informed him.

"Then we go downstairs." He looked at his men, one after the other. "Norrys. I'm posting you up here."

"Alone, sir?"

"Yes, alone, goddammit. If there's trouble, it'll be below not up here. Now we all have headsets and we keep in constant communication. Norrys . . . we don't check in within thirty minutes, none of us, you evacuate and make for the chopper. Understood? You do not come after us."

"Aye, sir."

He pulled away, looking nervously around. The guy was scared and Coyle didn't blame him a bit. Dayton and his boys were all SEALs, courtesy of the Navy, but all the training and all the experience in the world couldn't prepare you for this kind of thing.

Coyle was just glad it wasn't him.

He looked around, seeing the Hypertats and sheds, generating station and snowmobiles, pallets of yellow fuel drums stacked two high against the wall. So many places to hide. So many places for the imagination to create things that were not there.

Dayton turned to the rest of them. "Shall we go below, people?"

"Do we have a choice?" Horn said.

Down they went.

32

EMPEROR TWO

"WELL, SOMEBODY RAN THIS line," Dayton said. "And that somebody might still be down here."

They were looking at a yellow electrical cord that ran into a crevice and was connected to the Polar Haven beyond. And what its purpose was, nobody even wanted to guess.

The far wall of the glacier was set with many crevices, many of which had been taped off because they probably led to crevasses. There was even a huge circular tunnel that looked unpleasantly artificial, like the burrow of an immense worm. But only one had an electrical cord leading into it.

"Must be where they were working," Gwen said to the cold-pinched faces around her. "Maybe this is where they melted their *specimen* out."

And that's the very thing everyone was afraid of, because that specimen of Dr. Dryden's was missing. Nobody liked the idea of that.

Down in the cavern, Dayton stationed McKerr at the Polar Haven and Barnes up at the top of the ice rise that sloped down and down until it flattened out and met the far wall of the glacier itself where all the crevices were. This is where Dayton took Coyle and the others, following the cord. For despite the mammoth size of the lower cavern, with the security lights strung out there was really nowhere else for anyone to hide. Nothing but the Haven, a tool shed, and the collapsed remains of what looked like a tent. Nothing but open ice that lifted and canted, forming mounds and ridges, scalloped hollows. And all of it had been checked.

And while they were checking it out, dread growing in each and every one of them like a fetus coming to term, they found the electrical cord which led from the Polar Haven and down the slope and into one of the crevices.

There was frozen blood at the triangular mouth.

"All right," Dayton said. "Reja, take point. Long, you're the back door. Rest of you fall in-between."

And into the crevice they went.

The blue ice walls were clear as glass, flashlight beams glaring off them in blinding arcs. It was like being in some crazy mirror maze of fissured ice that started and stopped, twisting and turning, the walls narrowing and then widening. The lights created crawling shadows, distorted reflections, and that ever-present aquamarine glow that turned faces green and the smears of blood on the walls black as ink.

It was all claustrophobic, cramped, unsettling.

Coyle found it easy to imagine what it would be like to lose your way and never get out again, nothing but those ice walls pressing in closer and closer. But judging from the cleat-marks on the floor, they were not lost.

"There's something over here," Reja said, his light reflecting off the mouth of a fissure that led off from the main passage. "Like a room."

They followed him in there, their breath puffing out in white clouds that filled the flashlight beams like smoke. As they panned their lights around, they saw a dome-shaped room whose floor sloped into a central depression. Down there, forms were heaped and tangled. The forms of men long dead.

"Check that out," Horn said. "Bodies."

Their lights played off reaching fur-clad limbs and frosted faces frozen in what looked like agony or horror. Coyle counted six of them, but there might have been more beneath. As it was, they had been down there for decades, just a heap of mummified things with shrunken, skeletal bodies and faces blackened to leather that had split open in numerous places, revealing the gleaming bone beneath.

"Look at how they're dressed," Coyle said. "Fur suits . . . finnesko boots. Jesus, they've been down here since the 1930's . . . at least."

Gwen kept staring at them. "They must have died horribly."

"Let's go," Dayton said. "We're not here as historians."

He moved off, but Coyle and Gwen and Horn just stood there.

"There something on that guy's back," Gwen said.

And that's what they were all looking at . . . a weird fleshy clump on the exposed back of one of the cadavers, right between the shoulder blades. It looked like a spider or a crab. A big one.

"Nicky," Gwen said. "Mama's not liking this."

Neither was he. For he was thinking a lot of things at that moment and none of them were good.

"Come on, people," Dayton said. "We gotta step on it here."

"But that thing . . ." Gwen started to say.

"Doesn't concern us," Dayton told her.

And Coyle knew right then and there that Dayton knew more than he was saying. More than he wanted to admit, for he was not surprised by any of it. Almost as if he expected something like that.

"Doesn't concern us at all," he reiterated.

Reja and Dayton led them further into the crevice, following that snaking electrical cord and Coyle began to feel the tension build and build in him. Because he knew, down deep, that what they had just seen was pretty harmless compared to what they were *going* to see. The menace was thick inside him, coiling and filling, running through his arteries and settling into his marrow.

He was beginning to wonder if agreeing to any of this had not been a colossal mistake.

Reja suddenly stopped at a turn in the crevice. "Listen," he said.

Yes . . . there it was: a dripping. A dripping sound. And of all the sounds they could have heard down there, the sound of dripping water was the most startling of all. But as they waited there, they could also feel a suggestion of warmth and with it came a rancid, fermenting stink of moldering things and bacterial decay. Coyle had smelled something like it at NOAA Polaris that day.

And here it was again . . . sharp, revolting, a moist fruiting odor.

"Keep going," Dayton said.

Reja moved around the turn, his cleats ringing out on the ice, his Colt Carbine held in a defensive position. He was ready for anything. And as that

stink grew stronger and the dripping louder, echoing and echoing, they all were. Because it was coming.

Just ahead.

They followed Reja, flashlight beams jiggling and bobbing, and found a depression in the ice where something had been removed, apparently. Nobody had to mention what that might be.

Onward.

The dripping was even louder now, echoing out like they were in the depths of some subterranean cave. Nobody said a word. Coyle, Gwen, and Horn were bunched together in the cold. Dayton was mumbling something under his breath, weapon raised. And in the back, Long had his flamethrower ready.

Reja got there first, of course.

He found the chamber and when it opened up before him, he stopped again. Stopped dead and they could feel the shock rolling off him in waves. "HALT! HALT OR I SHOOT!" he cried out.

Carefully, the others inched forward . . .

33

UP ON THE RIDGE, Barnes thought: *Why is this taking so fucking long?*

They should have been back, up out of the crevice, ten minutes ago. He stood there, shaking. In the distance, over near the Polar Haven, he could see McKerr stalking back and forth with his rifle. Goddamn idiot, like he was on guard duty and not down here, not down in this awful place, this breeding ground of nightmares.

Barnes looked up.

Up there, amongst the millions of jutting icicles, he was seeing something, something ghostly and gaseous that was flowing out like smoke, enveloping. Mist. It was mist. An ice fog was being born up there, coalescing, brewing, and now spreading out, coming down. It was incredible. And scary . . . because he thought for one manic moment that there were *things* in the mist. Shapes. Forms that drifted about with an ethereal sort of motion.

Barnes blinked it away.

But that ice fog was still there. Not only was it there, but it was expanding, blowing out now like steam from a cauldron. Up there, those rows of icicles upon icicles like the glistening teeth of dragon . . . they were gone now. Just *gone*.

Barnes pulled off his goggles.

Maybe they were steamed up, maybe–

No, he was still seeing it.

And he was cold.

Not just chilly like he had been ever since they got out of that freezing wind outside, but numb. His hands were hurting with the cold and he couldn't feel his legs. In his heated polar suit he shouldn't have been that cold. He hadn't been that cold five minutes ago.

"McKerr! McKerr!" he called over the headset. "Something's going on here . . . I'm fucking numb! Do you see that mist up there? Do you see it?"

Over the speaker, McKerr just said, "Not seeing anything, man. It's real nice over here. Goddamn tropical, just—"

Barnes looked in his direction and McKerr was walking back and forth.

He wasn't even speaking.

"—loving it I am. Yes sir."

Who in the fuck was he talking to?

Barnes felt a stab of pain in his head.

And then something worse, a crawling feeling like worms were squirming over his brain. He could feel them. Thousands of fat, wriggling worms gliding and inching and now . . . now *burrowing.* Yes, digging into the meat of his gray matter, tunneling deep into his mind with a hot, invasive motion, infesting.

You're imagining this shit! It's not happening!

But the pain was intense, building to some shrieking crescendo of white-hot agony. The worms were eating his brain, sucking on convolutions and folds of gray meat, draining it, filling themselves with bloody gobs of nervous tissue. And as they did so, they split into more worms and then split again, each one fattening and thickening, swelling into a huge slug-like form that kept eating and eating–

Barnes hit the ice screaming.

He stripped away his balaclava and neck gaiter, exposed his head to the cold. He pressed his hands to his skull, clutching it tightly with his fingers. And he could feel that grisly motion in there, that slinking and creeping, feel his skull inflating, the plates of his cranium being rudely forced apart by the swelling mass of worms in there. He could hear them, suckling and chewing with thrashing mouth parts, a moist and succulent devouring.

My head, my head, my head! They're tearing my head apart! They're eating my mind, eating my mind, eating my fucking mind–

As he dragged himself over the ice, screaming his lungs out, he caught sight of McKerr through bleary, tear-filled eyes. McKerr was just pacing

back and forth, complete unaware of what was happening not fifty feet from him. Oblivious. Back and forth, back and forth, a toy soldier, nothing but a wind-up toy soldier. Except . . . except he was *humming.* Humming or singing with a weird fluting hollow sound like wind blown through a network of pipes.

Barnes lost sight of him.

Lost sight of everything as the pressure inside his skull increased and then increased again and tears of blood ran from his eyes and his body shook violently with convulsions that hammered him against the ice. And through the agony and insanity of his torment, he could hear a sound above him, circling in the ice fog, getting closer and closer . . . *ssshhh-ssshhh-ssshhh* . . . the sound of wings that were flapping frantically in fast-motion like those of a hovering hummingbird.

Whatever owned those wings was coming for him.

And knowing this, Barnes screamed yet again.

34

EMPEROR ONE

"HEY!" NORRYS CRIED AS he circled around one of the Hypertats above.

"Hey! Who is that?"

He'd seen a hulking, retreating form over by the sheds. A manlike form, a hobbling shape, that vanished into shadow and then magically reappeared threading between the Hypertats.

Norrys scanned back and forth with his MP5 submachine gun, a tactical flashlight bolted to it. The beam played over the Hypertats, exposing pockets of shadow, but revealing nothing else. He crept forward, starting each time the glacier cracked, his heart pounding and the cold making his eyes tear.

"You identify yourself right now!" he cried out. "Or I shoot to kill! You hear me?"

Silence.

Then a quick patter of boots across the ice.

Behind him.

No, off to the left.

No, over by the generator.

Yes, whoever it was, they were over by the generator. Hiding there. Waiting. But they didn't know who they were dealing with here. They didn't know the kind of professional Norrys was or the body count he'd amassed as an eight-year veteran of Naval special forces. But they were going to find out. Oh, yes.

"Captain Dayton . . . McKerr," he said over his headset. "There's somebody up here with me . . . Captain, you send somebody up?"

Static. Nothing but static.

Shit.

Dayton had checked in not ten minutes ago. Now it was dead air.

Norrys was sensing motion around him, but not sure where it was coming from. He tried again. “Listen to me . . . this is Norrys, topside . . . I’ve got movement up here . . . I don’t hear from you in the next twenty seconds, I’m assuming that this is an unfriendly . . . you copy that?”

More dead air.

Fuck.

The generator made a sudden squealing sound and he wheeled around, ready to start capping. Shadows. Nothing more. The generator squealed again like its belts were full of ice. Then it choked, shook, and died. Right away, the lights flickered. Then they dimmed slowly and went out like a blown candle.

Footsteps.

Norrys swung his MP5 around, the light cutting the darkness. The Hypertats. The sheds. The ice. “Whoever’s there . . . identify yourself or I’m taking you out . . .”

In the enveloping darkness there was gargling, moist laughter like somebody was laughing through a mouth of wet seaweed. It came and went.

Norrys was sweating in his polar suit.

Steam came off his head.

Something was circling him in the dark and he could smell whatever it was. It carried a dirty, flyblown stink like rotting vegetation. There was movement to the left. To the right. A hissing just behind him. He pinwheeled with his MP5, letting off a three-round burst that drilled harmlessly into the ice.

That cold, wet laughter.

A slithering noise like rustling vines.

He swung around and something hit the barrel of his MP5 in a fleshy blur and with incredible force. The gun was knocked from his hands and he heard it tumble across the ice.

He kicked out where he thought something was.

Then a hand slapped over his mouth, a hand that was damp and crawling. Norrys brought his elbow back and felt it sink into something soft.

Then something pierced his throat like dozens of wasp stingers.

35

EMPEROR TWO

OVER THE HEADSETS, MCKERR was crying out that the power went out.

That he'd lost contact with Norrys.

But nobody down in the crevice was paying him any mind. Not now. Not with what they were seeing in their glaring halogen lights . . . and what was seeing *them.* The nightmare that waited down there in the hollow in the ice. Reja had found a grotto and this was where the dripping came from. The electrical cord ended here, hooked up to a space heater that had been blasting hot air and making the grotto further melt out of the glacier. Water was dripping and pooling. Stalactites of ice that were crystal clear had grown from the roof to the floor and waiting there, in that womb of heat and wetness–

A figure: grotesque, horribly distorted.

Something far less than human.

A man or something like a man that shuffled with the side-to-side gait of a wounded animal and looked much like some colossal insect when he came at them, hissing and gibbering. His face was pallid, the skull beneath it exaggerated into a vulpine grin of hatred. His flesh was braided in muscle tissue. And everyone saw how misshapen he was . . . swollen and contorted, his back a huge cresting hump, his head almost laid flat against one sloping shoulder.

Things were crawling under his skin.

"That's . . . I think that's Paxton," Dayton said.

He looked out at them with lidless, glistening black eyes with slit pupils that were the purple-red of contusions. He made a snarling doglike sound.

Then he leaped.

He launched himself at them, bringing long and gnarled fingers to bear that were thorny like rose stems.

Reja fired and missed as he was knocked to the side.

Dayton fired a three-round burst, but Long, Horn, and Gwen were blocked by Dayton himself.

Coyle pushed forward, but he never got off a shot.

Dayton was slapped away, then those claws were coming at Coyle and he held the shotgun up in defense. Paxton lashed out at him, knocking the SPAS-12 from his hands. The claws at the end of those skeletal fingers were viciously sharp. They slit right through his parka and the down vest beneath. Had he been wearing less, they would have gutted him.

Long was in action by then, of course.

He swung his ice-axe and caught the Paxton-thing right in the face. He didn't sink it in there, but caught it with a glancing blow that sheared open that crawling face and speared the left eyeball out of its socket with a spray of tissue and blood that was almost greenish, translucent.

Paxton let out a keening wail, swinging around with an almost crablike, scuttling motion, tripping over the space heater that was heating up his little hidey hole.

Reja fired, piercing Paxton with a spray of bullets. He made a shrieking sound and tried to escape.

The others were circling around with their weapons.

Paxton didn't stand a chance and he knew it.

The green juice running down his face, he looked at them with a flat hatred that was nearly indescribable. His clawed hands were hooked for combat, lips pulled away from the circle of yellow teeth beneath. They could all smell his breath coming out hot and maggoty . . . like he had been chewing on carrion.

"Paxton," Dayton said to him.

That puckered mouth opened in a howling screech of rage and he jumped out at them and Coyle pulled the trigger. The 12-guage round caught him square in the chest and threw him up against the wall. Horn

followed suit and nearly took his head off. Long and Reja perforated him with rounds. He slithered on the floor and right away began to burst open, a jelly-like green emulsion bubbling out of him, steaming and sputtering.

Something was moving beneath his skin.

Something alive.

As they watched, Paxton split open like a slimy birth canal with a fleshy ripping sound.

Gwen made a gagging noise.

From that womb something ghostly white and fleshy emerged. It looked like a single human finger, the finger of a corpse. It wiggled in the air and hooked itself around the lip of the opening. Another digit pushed forth followed by another and another until there were no less than seven such appendages that reached out like white wormy fingers and flexed, pulling what they were connected to free.

A hand, Coyle thought with budding madness. *A fucking hand.*

But it was no hand.

Just some white, oily parasite that dropped free. It looked like a segmented and hairless spider, a leggy thing with an elongated, teardrop-shaped body. It dragged a fleshy sac behind it like a deflated balloon...or a placenta. Tiny pink threads connected it to the birth canal, the remains of Paxton.

Another crawled free.

Then another.

And another.

Coyle, trying to keep his stomach down, was thinking of that spidery creature between the shoulder blades of the body in the pit.

"Fuck is that?" Gwen was saying over and over again as she watched it breathe. "Fuck is that?"

Coyle didn't know and neither did Horn.

As they all watched, speechless, more and more of the spiderlike parasites began to pull themselves free until there were easily two dozen of them, all of them still connected to the wombs by those pink threads like the

static lines of parachutes. The parasites gathered there, more emerging all the time and spreading those long jointed legs with a hideous clicking sound. They climbed over the top of each other, glistening and sticky. They had no eyes, but several just crouched there, forelegs held out before them as if in indecision.

Somebody screamed.

The parasites began scuttling forward . . . in their direction.

A leggy, creeping mass of them.

And Coyle knew if one of those monsters touched him he would go totally insane. They were moving away from the pulsating carcass of Paxton with that scuttling noise and a constant tick-tick-tick of their legs.

"Fuck this," Long said and opened up with the flamethrower.

There had to have been at least two dozen of the parasites out now like bony ticks and dozens still being born. But the gushing fire engulfed them, spreading and licking, the flames lighting up the grotto with a yellow and orange flickering. Fuming gouts of black smoke rose up against those shafts of clear ice. The spider-things twisted and flopped as they cooked.

Everyone just stood there and watched them burn, the flames flickering and making the grotto glow.

When they died down a few minutes later, there was nothing but blackened clumps and the burned-out, smoking husk of Paxton. Not pretty, but infinitely preferable to what they were looking at before the fire.

Nobody moved.

Nobody did anything.

They just watched, fascinated and repulsed, but unable to turn away from what they were seeing through the haze of foul-smelling smoke.

There was a ridge just beyond that split the grotto in two. Dayton scanned it with his light. "Let's see what's over there."

Hesitantly, the others followed.

36

IN THE PITCH BLACKNESS near the Polar Haven, McKerr was nearly out of his mind. He cast his light around on the barrel of his Colt, seeking out the movement and whispering motion he felt all around him.

"Who's there?" he cried. "Who the hell is it? *Goddammit... you answer me!*"

Barnes wasn't answering.

Neither was Norrys above.

And alone there, McKerr could feel the darkness closing in around him like a noose. Not just shadows and cold, but an almost organic menace that was inching its way in closer and closer. Above, he kept hearing something like the fluttering of wings, an occasional sharp trilling and a muted buzzing that came and went like a bumblebee trapped in a jar.

He swung his light around.

Wanting to shoot.

Needing to shoot.

Only his training and experience kept him from doing so, the fear that he might cut down one of his own team or one of the civilians from Clime.

Then behind him, the sound of cleats crunching in the ice.

He put his light and weapon in the direction of the sound.

And he saw . . . at first he wasn't sure what he was seeing. Just some hunched-over shape cut from shadow, something with reaching gnarled hands and shining eyes that were too huge, too luminous to belong to a man.

Then the shape spoke: "Man, I think we're all alone."

Norrys? *Was that Norrys?*

The shape was looking more like a man now and McKerr relaxed slightly. It was just Norrys and it never had been anything else. McKerr

breathed in and out, trying to cancel out the nightmares that danced through his head, that image burned into his imagination of some shadowy thing approaching him, a distorted and fanged thing with a face of creeping white tendrils. Something that was certainly not Norrys.

He opened his mouth to ask the man what he was doing down here, why he had abandoned his post topside, and Norrys smiled. "It was getting weird up there, man. I was hearing things . . . seeing things . . . then I couldn't raise anybody on the radio." He smiled again in the glow of the flashlight. "I guess I panicked."

McKerr could understand that. "I'm glad you're here. There's things going on. I can't reach Barnes. Maybe we should go look for him."

"No, we better stay here. Follow orders. You know how Dayton gets."

McKerr nodded, glad he was no longer alone.

The things you could imagine in a place like this, the things you could hear. He panned his light around and when he brought it back, Norrys was closer. His breath came out in rolling clouds of fog. For one second there, McKerr thought it smelled like rotting meat.

Then it was gone.

"We're gonna be okay here," Norrys said, his voice kind of low and phlegmy like he needed to clear his throat. "Just you and me."

"Sure."

It was about this time as McKerr waited, listening, tensing for what might come next, that he became aware of . . . *heat.* It was crazy, but he was sensing waves of heat pressing against him. A heat that was damp, fetid, and feverishly hot. It smelled one moment like rotting green vegetation and the next like warm vomit. Then it was gone.

Imagination. Had to be.

"Hope Dayton gets his ass back here already," he said.

"Me too," Norrys said and he was closer than he had been.

McKerr felt a sudden stab of unease in his belly. An unease at the proximity of Norrys. It seemed that every time he looked away, Norrys sidled in just a bit closer. It was the fear, surely. Fear like this could make the

toughest men want to hold hands down here in this catacomb in the ancient ice.

But that smell.

Then the heat.

Gone now . . . but so unnatural, so vile while it lasted.

Norrys was breathing very harshly, like his lungs were congested. “Hey . . . you got a cigarette?”

“I don’t smoke, dumbass,” McKerr said and then looked at him, had the weirdest hallucination that his face was . . . *moving*. “You know . . . you know I don’t smoke.”

“I must’ve forgot.”

He was closer now.

“You okay, Norrys?”

Norrys grinned. “Sure, I am. Just fine. You hear something out there?”

McKerr played his light around. Yeah, he was hearing all kinds of things out there, but he couldn’t be sure what he was actually hearing and what was just in his head. It was getting so he didn’t trust either.

He turned towards Norrys.

Norrys’ grin was very large, very toothy. He face looked sallow in the light, almost yellow. And he was drooling. “We’re gonna be okay, buddy . . . just you and me . . .”

He edged in closer . . .

37

WHEN THEY GOT OVER the ridge and started moving down the other side into a bowl-shaped pocket, they saw something waiting down below, curled up on the ice.

A body.

They went down to it, lights jiggling and throwing shadows around them.

"God," Gwen said as they got in closer, putting their lights on it.

"Damn," Horn said, his breath coming out in a rolling white cloud. "Is that . . . is that a man?"

It looked like one . . . almost, but split wide open and everyone wondered if it was going to be another incubator like Paxton. But it wasn't that at all.

Realizing that it wasn't going to jump out at them, that it was truly dead or incapable of motion at the very least, they ringed around it, put their lights on it and tried to figure exactly what they were looking at.

Horn looked at Coyle and Coyle looked at Gwen, then they all turned to Dayton who as usual did not seem particularly shocked at anything. Unsettled maybe, but not shocked, not horrified as he should have been.

"I wouldn't get too close," Long said.

Dayton ignored him.

He crouched down by the body. It was laying on its side, naked, something that had been a man but split from forehead to crotch. A corpse. Yet there was something very funny about it.

Dayton prodded it with the barrel of his rifle.

It was frozen to the ice.

He stood up and gave it a nudge with his boot and it split open the rest of the way, the two halves falling apart.

“Holy shit,” Horn said.

There was nothing inside.

Just a frozen shell that was empty like an injection mold used to thermoform a plastic action figure. Nothing else.

“A casing,” Gwen said. “Nothing but a fucking casing . . . like whoever was in there shed their skin.”

But that wasn’t exactly what Coyle was thinking. He was picturing something more along the lines of a chrysalis or a pupa. Like something that had come to term in the human shell, then cast it aside when it was ready.

Dayton pushed the body with his boot so he could see its face . . . or half of it. There was no doubt it was Paxton. He rolled it over and there was the hollow casing of something like a spider between the shoulder blades. And then it all became clear or as clear as it would ever be: those spiderlike parasites attached to a healthy human, parasitized them, and then some sort of duplicate emerged. Something like a monstrous, living incubator. Something horribly pregnant.

Coyle was about to fire about fifty questions at Dayton because the man obviously knew exactly what he was looking at . . . then there rose a sudden grinding of ice, a rumbling that shook the crevice and knocked nearly everyone down. It came again, the grotto shaking, shards of ice dropping from the ceiling.

It was coming from a crevice in the glacier wall.

“Pull back!” Dayton cried out. “Pull back!”

Horn and Reja retreated into the crevice with Gwen right behind them, yanking Coyle with her. Long pulled back and Dayton went with him.

Horn in the lead, they all ran as best as they could through that winding passage of blue ice, lights bobbing and cleats ringing out. Dayton kept shouting for them to *move, move,* and his voice had taken on a hysterical note.

When Horn’s light picked out the opening of the crevice, Reja cried out, “What the hell was it? A fucking earthquake?”

But as Coyle suspected it was something much worse than that.

38

THE FIRST THING GWEN saw when they got out of the crevice was Barnes.

Her flashlight beam found him right away like it had known exactly where to look, what to reveal to her in that biting darkness to amplify her horror to the utmost. He was curled up on the ice, wrenched into a grotesque fetal position as if he had died in the midst of the most awful convulsions. His knees were drawn up to his chest, his hands hooked into frosted claws.

And his face . . . dear God, his face . . .

Horn sighed. "Just like the guy in the Hypertat."

"Sonofabitch," Dayton said and there was almost a hint of emotional angst to his voice as if this was more than an inconvenience to him, but a personal loss. "They got to him . . . while we were down there . . . they got to him . . ."

And yes they had.

And nobody there needed to ask who *they* were.

Barnes had died screaming, that much was obvious.

And the horror and agony that had inspired that screaming had been so terrible that the scream itself had torn open his mouth as if it hadn't been able to open wide enough naturally to convey the torment of what he had seen, what he had felt, and what he had known in those last unspeakable moments. His mouth was ripped open a couple inches in each corner and it gave him a grinning, macabre look like a laughing cemetery puppet. His face was purple and distended, a sculpture of frozen blood ejected from his mouth and nostrils, frozen tissue blown from his eye sockets. The ice around him was spattered with meat and sparkling red whorls.

We'll never get out of here alive, Gwen thought.

None of us.

She was the last person in the world to throw in the towel, but there were limits to everything. *Limits.* And down here in this cyclopean netherworld of ice she felt that she had now reached hers. The point where all the guts and determination and optimism in the world simply curled-up in your belly and died. Because if the depraved nightmares of antiquity did not do them in, she figured, then the cold would.

Because it was cold.

Tropical compared to out in the Trough, but still dangerous. They all wore ECWs, boots, mittens and thermal gloves that were heated by battery packs, but there was a limit to that, too, she knew. Hypothermia would find them soon enough. They would begin to feel dopey, confused, then they would start making reckless decisions . . . and down here, that was as close to death as you could get.

She stared at Barnes's corpse, drinking in what it told her about her enemy and the power that enemy wielded.

We're all going to die like that with our brains boiling in our skulls, convulsing as our eyes melt and our faces twist into fright masks. Because that's what these things do. They eat your mind right down to the bare and bleeding bone, dissolve it like flesh in an acid bath.

She turned away and saw Coyle looking at her, his eyes fixed on her own, unblinking, unflinching, feeling what she felt and knowing what she knew. She could almost hear his voice in her head, telling her to keep it together, to hold on tight, because she was not alone and never had been.

She smiled at him and her face was so cold she thought it would split open.

He smiled back.

Beneath their balaclavas, they could not see each other do so, but it was there and they knew it.

Keep it together, Gwen, just a little bit longer.

Okay, Nicky. I'll do it. I'll do it.

39

"WHAT HAPPENED TO THE lights?"

Horn kept asking that question in the coveting, murky blackness, but nobody seemed to have an answer.

As they moved away from the gory profusion that was Barnes, no one spoke. Dayton had been trying to reach everyone in his squad for some time and the fact that he hadn't spoke volumes about what was happening to them down there. The lights had been shut off now. And one by one, they were being pulled off into the darkness to be tortured individually. That's how it would work and was working.

They were all shining their lights around, looking, searching, seeking out what they could feel moving all around them now. Coyle put his light above and saw nothing but a condensing ice fog that steamed and billowed and swirled.

The Old Ones were up there, he knew.

They were not showing themselves, but they were most assuredly there.

"Fucking things," Reja said. "I'd just like to get a shot at one of them."

But Horn shook his head. "It's not their way. They like to play games and their favorite is hide-and-seek."

"All right," Dayton said. "Keep your minds focused. We're not done here yet. Those fucking things can only defeat us if we defeat ourselves first."

Words of wisdom, Coyle thought.

Dayton's voice had barely died away when there came a cacophonous and shrill piping that almost sounded angry. It came from everywhere, nowhere, from the depths of the ice cave and from the depths of everyone's minds, the thin and reedy piping of a syrinx echoing out and out.

Coyle felt a booming like a gong in his head at the sound of it.

Dayton led them on and their lights picked out the Polar Haven.

No one was there, of course.

"Blood," Long said. "Blood."

There was a smear of it on the ice and it led away as their lights followed its trail. There was a splash of it on the Polar Haven, a frozen puddle of it at their feet, then a gruesome smeared pathway leading away as if McKerr had been murdered, then his gutted carcass dragged away deeper into the cavern.

Dayton started following the trail.

As did Reja and Long. All of them had their weapons at the ready.

"This is a fucking waste of time," Horn said. "That much blood . . . he's dead. Let's just make for the chopper. We can't do anymore here."

"We have to try," Coyle told him.

"That's bullshit."

And Reja, who was amazingly calm and quiet in the face of peril, suddenly moved very quick and put the barrel of his Colt Carbine right in Horn's face. And the look in his eyes told everyone there that he would pull the trigger and had no doubt done such things before. "Listen to me, you sonofabitch. We're not leaving anybody behind unless they're a corpse. McKerr was one of us and we're either going to find his fucking body or we're not leaving. That's how it works. That's how we play the game: we don't leave *anyone* behind. And if that was you, Horn, I wouldn't stop until I found you. Nothing could make me. So just shut the fuck up and let's get this done."

With that he stomped away, following the blood trail.

Nobody said a word about it after that. If anything, Reja's words had galvanized them. Even Horn seemed more intent now and that was really something for that cynical boy.

They moved on—Coyle, Dayton, and Reja out front; Gwen, Horn, and Long bringing up the back. Their lights played over the frozen crust, revealing horns and serrated crests of blue-green ice, occasional pressure cracks that fanned out in crazy spider-webbed patterns. And more blood, of course. That was constant. It might disappear for five or ten feet, but it always showed up again.

Coyle was so tense by this point, he thought he might shatter. Because he knew that at any moment they were going to see something. *Something that'll take one of us or all of us.*

As they came up a rippled mound of ice, he heard a sound which stopped him and made Gwen walk right into him. They all stopped, jumbled together. He didn't have to alert anybody to what he heard because they were all hearing it by then: a crunching and slurping noise that sounded very much like a lion gnawing on a carcass out on the veldt.

The blood trail.

Now the sound of feeding.

Dayton charged up the mound and on the other side, lying in a perfect pool of darkness down in a little glacial hollow was a body. It had to be McKerr for it was dressed in an olive-drab polar suit of the sort Dayton's men were wearing. At least, it was dressed in the ragged remains of one . . . because the body had been horribly mangled, looked like a pack of very hungry dogs had set upon it. It was torn and twisted, green polar suit and flesh and blood and jutting red bones all tangled up into a loose-limbed mass. Bits of tissue and globs of blood were sprayed out in every which direction. It had to be McKerr, but you wouldn't have known it because his face had been gnawed right off the leering skull beneath.

Long, who had seen his share of corpses, stumbled back, overwhelmed by it. Gwen turned away, too, but Horn just kept staring at the mess with his light on it, his lips moving like he wanted to say something.

Dayton charged ahead, hearing the thing that had done this, its low and gurgling breathing. Coyle went with him, Reja at his heels. And when they saw it, waiting there on the ice, somebody gasped and somebody moaned.

But all lights were on it.

Here's what Coyle saw: a hunched-over troll-like thing with a face like a grotesque fleshy moon, pale and pitted and wormy, seamed with red and gray. A face that crawled over what was beneath. It had huge yellow eyes lacking pupils that were threaded with pink veins that pulsed. Its mouth was an unbroken circle of gray, needle-like teeth. Gore dripped free and splatted to the ice.

It must have heard them coming and tried to sneak away with a mouthful of meat.

"That's . . . that's Beeman," Long said.

Dayton had his MP5 on the thing. "Not anymore it's not," he said.

The malformed horror before him began to change, its face melting like plastic, oozing and bubbling and reshaping itself into other faces . . . Barnes, then Norrys, then McKerr, then a whole series of faces that he only recognized from photographs: Stone and Kenneger, Dryden and Paxton and Reese.

Reja charged forward, just beside himself. "Norrys! You motherfucker! You killed McKerr! You dirty sonofabitch–"

He got right in the field of fire and nobody could shoot. And maybe that had been the thing's plan all along . . . to use its hypnotic screen or whatever it was to confuse and confound those there, draw one in to shield itself. Reja could not be blamed. He saw Norrys, a stinking and murdering version, but Norrys all the same. He brought his rifle butt down on the thing and by then, whatever it really was, it had hold of him, crushing him in its grip.

His rifle went skidding across the ice.

Coyle went after the thing, he smashed its face with his SPAS-12 and smashed it again and the thing tossed aside Reja, throwing him right into Long and Horn. They all went down in a heap, flashlight beams darting around in the darkness. Dayton was trying to a shoot without hitting anyone. Gwen wanted to do the same.

Dayton charged in and a thorny, scabrous hand clasped his face and sent him flying back into Gwen.

Panic ripped open inside Coyle because he knew the thing had him. It was unbelievably strong. He punched and kicked it, but it did no good. He almost got away, but it moved with a dazzling speed and something slugged into him, his arms going numb right up to the shoulders. He wasn't even aware that the shotgun fell from his hands. He wasn't aware of much at all.

Nothing but flying backward as the thing threw him.

And the sound of his own cry.

40

IN HIS HEAD, COYLE thought he heard Gwen cry out: *Nicky! Look out! Look out! You're going over!*

Her voice was there.

In those few seconds he flew backward, he distinctly heard it cry out in his head. He heard the terror and anxiety in it . . . then he was going back and back, expecting to strike the ice wall and be knocked senseless. But there was no wall. Just a few streamers of yellow tape that Dryden's team had strung across the mouth of a crevice. He felt his body hit them, stretch them, and then they broke. But they did manage to slow his momentum.

He was flung to the left, struck the fissured wall of the crevice, and then went down on his belly, swinging around in a wild slippery circle on the glossy ice, spinning and finally coming to rest on the lip of the crevasse.

His legs from knees on down were hanging out in empty air.

He reached out frantically, trying to dig his mittens into the ice, trying to find something, anything, to hold onto. And as he did so, he slid down another inch. His heart hammering, he could feel the great depths beneath him reaching up for him. Any moment now, he knew, gravity was going to pull him down.

And he would drop for a mile before he hit bottom.

Alone in the encompassing blackness, he waited for it.

41

NOBODY WENT AFTER COYLE.

They couldn't.

The beast was among them and it wanted blood.

It came right at Gwen in the dappled illumination of fumbled flashlights. It made a high screeching sound and scuttled over the ice on all fours like a crab. She pulled herself back, wondering where in the hell her gun was, and the thing came on with a stench of spoiled meat.

"Watch it!" somebody yelled. "Watch it!"

The thing looked up with those yellow, blood-seamed eyes and hissed, its shriveled lips pulling back from sheathed jaws and Dayton fired. He put a volley of three rounds into the thing that knocked it back as if it had been slapped.

Then it came right back again, trying to work itself as close to her as possible so the others could not fire upon it. Gwen kicked out at it as it reached for her. Dayton hit it with a glancing shot that barely slowed it down.

Steaming, hot, and repulsive, it prepared to leap.

Horn, God bless his innate recklessness, didn't give a shit who he hit as long as he took out the thing amongst them. He brought his assault shotgun to bear, bringing it around by the pistol-grip and took quick aim. On automatic mode, the SPAS-12 can pump out four rounds per second. He jerked the trigger and got off one that went high and wild and then another that caught the beast in the shoulder and vaporized said shoulder, knocking the thing backwards and down with a grinding squeal of agony.

It tried to rise up again.

But they were ready.

Long didn't bother with his flamethrower because the thing was just too close to the others, but Dayton and Horn and Reja had their weapons

trained on it, bracketed lights full in the creature's face. In that moment before they opened up, it stared at them with those glistening yellow eyes and a rank steam poured from its mouth.

Then everyone opened up.

The beast never had a chance. Dayton peppered it with his MP5, Reja drilled it with his Colt Carbine, and Horn pumped two 12-gauge rounds into it that nearly tore it in half. It finally went down in a writhing, boiling mass of undulating flesh and thrashing limbs. But it wasn't dead. It rose up from the pool of its own running anatomy, blood and slime and flesh hanging like confetti. It opened its puckered, bleeding mouth and screamed at them with a shrieking, glottal cry that was nearly deafening.

Gwen had found her Beretta by then and she put a round right into its skull. It went through the left eye and sprayed filth out the back of its head.

And that's when they all saw what it really was.

What it had always been.

An incubator like the others.

A viscid and squamous horror that needed flesh and blood to feed the things that nested inside of it. The barrage of slugs that had blasted into it had torn open the ECWs it wore, the ones that had no doubt belonged to the original host body it had invaded. They were shredded, ripped, smoking from contact burns. Now they could see its throat, part of its chest, one misshapen arm of braided muscle. Its corded flesh was not flesh as such, but the bodies of the parasites that lived off it, their segmented, wriggling bodies that were housed in its tissue. It was crawling with those leggy, spidery parasites that had been born out of the creature down in the crevice.

Its entire body was creeping with them.

It was like some living cocoon giving forth grotesque pupae.

Some were large with spreading jointed legs like spider crabs and others small and twitching like tarantulas. As everyone watched in horror, legs and segmented bodies were disengaging themselves from the thing. Appendages like pencils burst from its throat, its face, its chest, dozens and dozens of them like wiggling pale fingers. An especially large parasite unfolded itself out of the mouth, a fan of legs reaching out like a pallid hand emerging from

the thing's throat. More and more all the time. Several of them rose from the matted hair atop its bulbous head.

Horn couldn't take it anymore.

He opened up with his SPAS-12 and blew the crawling thing into fragments. It literally broke open with a moist, cracking sound. And from the burst smoking husk, the parasites came like an army of bony, embryonic spiders .

Then Long squeezed the trigger on his flamethrower and engulfed the nest in a curtain of fire and what was beneath sizzled and smoked and snapped. The parasites popped open like ticks in the heat, *pop-pop-pop,* one after the other and the sound of that was absolutely hideous. A few scuttlers made it away and Horn stomped one with his boot, its chitinous exoskeleton cracking open with a hiss of white goo.

The others wouldn't make it far in the cold.

Gwen, who was absolutely beside herself with revulsion and fear by this point, was shaking so badly she could barely keep on her feet. She turned away from the stinking, burning mass and then her eyes widened. "Nicky," she said. *"Nicky . . ."*

42

COYLE WAS HANGING ON now out of luck and sheer strength.

He did not dare move.

He did not dare even breathe.

It wouldn't take much and he knew it. The crevice was black and grainy and he could not see a thing, only the flickering light from above that painted the mouth with bands of yellow and orange light.

The amazing thing was that he was no longer aware of the cold. It was there, all right, but with every muscle in his body straining, his blood juiced with adrenaline, he was warm. Very warm. Hot sweat was running down his face, steaming in the frigid air. It was stinging his eyes and trickling down his spine. All he could feel besides his tensing, aching muscles, was the abyssal depths below him. And that made his belly flop over upon itself again and again as he imagined what the impact would be like far below.

Then flashlights were in his face and he could see the crevice angling up to the mouth above. It wasn't very far away at all . . . maybe twenty feet at most, not even. If he could just move enough to dig his cleats in.

"Nicky!" Gwen's voice. "Nicky! Hang on!"

And at that moment, some self-sacrificing part of him wanted to call out to her like some hero in an old movie. *No, don't risk it! Don't come after me! Just leave me down here and save yourselves!* But his mouth refused to frame those words. It, like the rest of him, wanted to live. He did not want to die this way, plummeting hundreds and hundreds of feet into an icy grave.

He could hear them discussing it above and then Dayton simply took charge as he was prone to. What they did was form a human chain with Dayton at the mouth of the crevice, Reja next, then Horn, then Long, and finally Gwen. They dug their Stabilicer cleats in, locked hands, and slowly, inch by inch, they moved closer and closer to him.

Coyle felt himself slide out another inch.

He called up reserves of strength he never knew he had, pressing himself down into the ice, trying to meld himself to it.

Gwen was only a few feet away now.

She had taken her balaclava off and her cold-pinched face was beautiful. Simply beautiful. Her eyes were huge and dark and he could see how much she cared for him. It made his heart squeeze in his chest.

"Hold still, Nicky," she said.

As her reaching hand got closer and closer, he heard a sudden and intrusive noise up in the cavern: a high and evil buzzing like thousands of bees were fanning their wings. It was a very darkly harmonious sound, but one filled with malefic intent that made the ice around him vibrate and tremble. The Old Ones were gathering in masses now, winging out of the darkness of the Beardmore or flying up from some bottomless crevasse and clustering out there like rooks.

Gwen's hand.

Inches away.

A crackling sound rose up, that electronic pinging and humming as if some eldritch machine buried in the ice was starting up, sending out oscillating waves of power. He felt a sickness roll in his belly, a hot-sweet nausea at the sound and feel of it. If those things attacked now, came to drain their minds now–

He lifted a hand to clutch Gwen's.

And the crevice shook, rippled with seismic energy that shook the glacier, made Dayton's chain of bodies tense. Everyone cried out. More than a few were cussing. But they did not falter, did not hesitate in what they were doing.

Coyle gasped. He started to slide and it felt like the bottom of his belly had opened up, because he knew he was going down this time.

Then Gwen snatched his wrist and held it in a grip of iron.

"Got him!" she called out.

"Okay." Dayton's voice. "On the count of three we move together! One . . . two . . . three . . ."

“Mama’s got you, Nicky,” Gwen said, straining. “She won’t let go . . .”

They moved together as Dayton had instructed. Left leg up a few inches, then right, then left and then right. Coyle could feel the irresistible strength flowing through that chain of arms and helping hands, that strength and willingness to sacrifice which he knew was purely human and had nothing to do with aliens or their engineering. This was real. This was vital. This was the human condition in all its unstoppable glory.

Coyle was dragged up ten inches, then a foot, and then he arched up his knee and dug his cleats into the lip of the crevasse and pushed and then he was part of it, part of that caterpillar of human muscle and human determination. He moved farther and farther from the crevasse. Dayton was out of the crevice now. Then Reja and Horn. They gave one last powerful jerk and he was up himself.

His ass thumped firmly in the crevice mouth, cleats dug in.

Somebody dropped their flashlight and it rolled past him, end over end, the arcing light picking out the fissured convolutions of the crevice itself and then bouncing over the lip and into the fathomless blackness below. The light reflected off the splintered blue ice walls and the sheathed icicles marking the descent into nameless depths far below. Then the light was gone. They never heard it hit, down and down and down it went, swallowed into the chasm.

His head spinning, Coyle finally allowed himself to suck in an unrestricted breath.

43

WHEN COYLE GOT TO his feet, that rumbling rose up again and everything vibrated. The cavern shook and icicles fell. Seismic waves of force passed through the glacier and Coyle and Gwen clung to each other as it felt like the entire cavern was about to collapse on them.

But it didn't.

But something was happening.

Something far below them was making itself known and nobody really wanted to know what that was. But in their hearts, they were aware of what it might be. That something hellish and pestilential was being born down there and what they were hearing and feeling was its birth pains.

It died away, then came again and the Emperor shook, ice falling around them. It was repeated again and again and each time, that rumbling from below was louder, closer, more insistent like something was being summoned from the bottomless, crevassed underworld beneath.

While the rest of them just trembled at the very idea of it, Dayton followed it to its source: the huge circular tunnel punched into the ice wall that looked very artificial and very recent. The rumbling echoed up from the tunnel and though it seemed to come from far below, it was not far enough for anyones' liking.

Lights panned the mouth of the tunnel, reflecting off the blue ice and dying off in the stygian blackness far below. There was something cold, eternal, and mordantly evil about what might be down there, but nobody dared comment on the fact.

"Long? Reja?" Dayton said. "Go over to the Polar Haven and get us some rope and climbing gear. The survey crew left quite a collection."

"You're not going down there?" Gwen said, astounded at the very idea.

"Yes, I am."

"But you can't do that . . . whatever it is . . . is down there!"

Dayton smiled thinly. “That’s why I came. To search for survivors and sort out anything that posed a danger. And down there, down below, is something I’ve been waiting a long time to see. Something very old.”

“Nicky!” Gwen said. “Will you please talk sense to this man!”

“Sure,” he said. “I’ll talk sense to him all the way down.”

44

THE TUNNEL CANTED DOWN at a near perfect 30° angle so the incline wasn't so bad at all. With Stabilicers on their boots, climbing harnesses, and rope, it was a fairly easy descent. Dayton was an old hand at mountaineering. He pounded in the titanium ice-screws, checked everyone's climbing rigs, then led the way down.

Twenty minutes into it, Coyle began to get uneasy.

It was silent.

Dead silent.

The only sounds were the echoing of cleats digging into ice and rope threading through harnesses, men grunting and occasionally cursing. Nothing else. That rumbling had stopped almost as soon as they began their descent which made him think that whatever had been making it was lying in wait down there for them.

But he wouldn't dwell on it.

He was less worried about himself and where he was going and what he might meet than he was about leaving Gwen and Horn above. Just the two of them. They were both capable . . . but there were dangers in Emperor Cave that no man or woman was the equal of.

They kept descending.

After a time, Dayton called out, "We've come two-hundred feet."

"How far we going?" Coyle called down to him, his voice echoing off into stillness.

"We got four-hundred feet of rope."

Coyle knew full well that Horn and Gwen were not happy with him for volunteering for this. Gwen, as a matter of fact, was downright pissed. But he had to do this. He had to see. Somehow, it was necessary.

As they decended, flashlights lighting up the tunnel and casting jumping shadows around them, he was amazed by the tunnel itself. The ice was old, pellucid and deep blue. The tunnel was perfectly symmetrical. No so much as a scratch or cut as if it had been burned through, melted, something.

He couldn't even imagine how.

And part of him didn't want to.

Down, down, down.

Goddamn Dayton, he's leading us to our deaths and look how happily we follow.

Coyle was amazed by it.

Every single shred of survival instinct and self-preservation within him was screaming at him to get out of here, to get back to the chopper and get out . . . but was he listening? He was not. Is this what it was like for soldiers in battle? Knowing they were going to die but pushing further into the breach anyway, consumed by a higher purpose than simple continuation?

About ten minutes after Dayton called out that they were down well over 300 feet, he called them to a stop. "Wait here, all of you," he said and went down alone. They listened to his cleats biting into the glacier, felt the tug of the rope.

They waited five minutes.

Coyle was amazingly warm. Part of that was the exertion, but another part was the ice itself which maintained an even 32° farenheit regardless of external temperatures. It was simply a matter of physics.

"All right!" Dayton called out. "Come down!"

Coyle was the last to reach the ice plateau that Dayton stood on. It was sort of a shelf, perfectly smooth. Dayton was standing at its outer edge. There was a drop of maybe fifteen feet and then . . . earth. Solid ground. The actual crust of Antarctica.

He pounded in another ice-screw and threaded his rope through his harness and rapelled down there.

They followed him, one by one.

The ground was uneven, frozen solid as granite, rising in low hills and tight hollows, rivers of ice spreading in every which direction. The ceiling was at least sixty feet above them, an absolutely dazzling display of hanging icicles. Light had never touched this place before. The ground had not been exposed to the sun in at least thirty million years.

They came to a lake of ice and crossed it.

With only flashlights to see by, it would have been easy to get lost down there as they threaded over ice flows and in-between rising shelves of rock and through winding hollows, but Dayton, as always, was prepared: every twenty feet or so he sprayed a glob of luminous paint, leaving a ghost trail behind them.

As they moved down a slope and finally reached a great flattened plateau that looked very much like an ancient riverbed, he said, "We've come down another seventy feet."

As they crossed the rocky plateau, the belly of the glacier so high above now that their lights could not reach it, Coyle began to notice that instead of shelves of jutting rock and heaps of loose stones he was seeing titanic broken columns and flat slabs and what looked like shattered pyramidal shapes rising from the earth.

All of it was far too symmetrical to be natural in origin.

They were getting close to something now.

Something ancient.

Something that made him feel tense.

And they were all feeling it, he knew. He could sense it coming from every man in an unbroken current: an almost electric atavistic dread. But they pushed on and the shapes around them became more numerous and then, within ten minutes, a huge gully opened up before them . . . and rising from it and up into the glacier high above was what they had come to see.

45

THE CITY.

They were looking at a city and on a scale that dwarfed the great pyramids.

Coyle knew it was not of human origin. Perhaps part of the ruins that Dr. Gates from Kharkov Station had discovered. But that had been in the Dominion Range, an easy hundred miles from here . . . could the ruins extend that far?

Of course they can . . . quit trying to put this in human perspective. What you're seeing is light years beyond that. This place is older than the mountains and the race who built it are old as time itself.

The gully reached down farther than their lights would illuminate, the city going on and on, descending into blackness as it clung to the gully wall, then rising up out of the darkness below and ascending to unimaginable heights above. It was immense. Just a piece of an ancient city, but one that was mammoth and spread out as far as their lights could reach . . . the glacier reaching down in places and engulfing it completely in runnels and flows of clear blue ice.

What Coyle saw was the face of it and it was very crowded and compressed like some Medieval slum, everything pressed together, intersecting, and overlapping, so geometrically busy that it taxed the brain to follow its lines and try to figure out where one thing began and where another ended. There were stacks of blocks giving way to bulbous cylinders and ornate columns, they themselves cut through by towers and cones welded to rectangles and bubble-like obelisks and narrow piping which gave away seamlessly to gargantuan spires and steeples that vanished high above in the primal darkness.

All of it was honeycombed with oval passages that looked like wormholes in the face of that nightmarish, cyclopean alien tomb. It was

made of some glossy black rock that looked oddly machined, set with discs and tubes, shafts and something like obtuse gear teeth.

He could not get past the idea that it almost looked like it was machined from a single massive slab of metal or some stone that was a composite of both.

In the back of his skull, there was a thrumming noise that began to make his head ache and a voice, a single traumitized voice that said, *your race was born to this place. Let the cradle of humanity be its grave.*

They could not reach the city over the gully and, honestly, to a man they did not want to.

It was bad enough standing where they were, viewing it from a distance without crawling through those nighted passages and claustrophobic tangles. There were spaces within, they knew, hollows and corridors and labyrinthine rooms haunted by primrodial memory that would strip the unprotected human mind bare.

If the urban legends were true and what Dr. Gates of Kharkov said were in fact reality, then it was cold alien wombs like this where the human race had not only been born but taken through the ages and modified with the ultimate goal of raising not only intelligence but an intelligence that could be harvested.

"We're not the first here," Reja said and his voice was almost shocking in the silence. If he hadn't have spoken it was hard to say how long they would have stood there like that, gape-jawed, wide-eyed, their minds cycling down into bottomless black depths.

He was pointing his flashlight beam at something tangled in a rocky dip.

They all went over there.

It was a body . . . yet it didn't look right. It was wearing ECWs, bunny boots, standard-issue red parka . . . but it looked deflated.

And it was.

For inside those ECWs were only bones, bones encrusted with frozen blood. A skull stared up at them from the hood.

"What the hell could do something like that?" Long said.

Something unbelievable, Coyle thought. *Something that sucks the flesh off a man and leaves only bones and clothing behind.*

"It must be one of the engineers, the survey guys who'd been working with Dryden," Dayton said. "Reese, I think."

Coyle turned back to the city. As he panned it with his light, that thrumming noise began to increase in his head. It came with sharp fingers of pain that seemed to blot everything out in pulsations of blinding white light that made his vision blur.

As sensory imput was dampened, he began to hear–

Screams.

A great exhaled susurration of screams echoing through his head. Not the screams of two or three or even a dozen, but the screams of hundreds, of thousands, all of them screaming in writhing agony . . . and he knew, he knew from the pit of his being, that these were the voices from the city . . . the voices of his ancestors that had been brought here to undergo forced mutation, genetic engineering, vivsection... a hundred techniques that filled them with wild superstitious terror and a bone-deep physical agony, a carnival of suffering that was literally nameless . . .

When he came out of it, riven with fright, he could nearly smell those awful places in the city where the techniques had been practiced . . . he could smell blood and marrow, spilled guts and siphoned fluids, biopsies and transplants, tears and vomit and insanity and, yes, the sharp acid stink of fear.

"We better get the hell out of here," Long said and meant it. "That chopper will touch down again in forty-five minutes and I don't want to miss it."

The fright beneath his words was palpable and he had every reason in the world to be afraid. They all did. Coyle was nearly overwhelmed by it himself. The Old Ones inspired it and this city, with malign and deranged memories ghosting from its bones, only amplified it.

They were children.

The whole race was in the shadow of alien dominance, but particularly Coyle and those three that stood with him at the threshold of the evil that

was and the evil that would *be*. Children afraid of the dark and the shadows in the corner, the thing under the bed and that loathsome breathing in the closet. And maybe, and most importantly, *themselves*. For it was inside them. All of them. What the aliens had developed and implanted. Being so close to the city, they could feel it. Feel it gaining strength, rising up to consume their humanity.

They were mired now in horror.

Children shivering in their beds as a branch scrapes at the window and absolutely no one could promise them that that stick was not what their overheated imaginations told them it was.

Coyle could see it in their faces. Cold logic and reason were malfunctioning as something unseen and malefic gained strength. Reality had taken on the silver, surreal shades of madness, of nightmare. Demons were riding the wind and this time they were not hallucinations.

They were stark and real and malevolent.

And inescapable.

It was about that time that the rumbling started again. The same sort of trembling seismic action they'd heard and *felt* in the crevice. It seemed like the city was shaking, weird rhythmic vibrations running through the earth beneath their feet.

In the city, there was a weird sort of shine like phosphorus. They could see it through the honeycombed mouths as if something luminous and large were winding its way through those primeval channels.

"RUN!" Dayton said. "RUN!"

There was no getting around the complete panic in his voice. For unlike the others he knew exactly what it was, what was moving through the ruins just as he knew it was coming for them.

A nightmare horror.

From the bowels of the city.

46

WITH THE STABILICER CLEATS on their boots, the best they could do was an even jog and it was dangerous moving amongst all that shattered masonry, low dips and yawning hollows, the occasional jagged crevice that could have swallowed them alive. It was a manic race and they all knew it was a race for life. They could hear the thing from the city screeching with a piercing, almost hypersonic cry as it gave chase.

By the time they reached the slope, they barely had the strength left to climb it. At least Coyle didn't. But then he was in nowhere near the condition of Dayton and his men. When he moved too slow, clawing up the embankment on his hands and knees, Reja hooked an arm around him and pretty much dragged him to the top.

"Hold it," Dayton panted, unclipping a white phosphorus grenade from his web belt. "Spread out . . . we'll never outrun that thing. I'd rather face it here than in the tunnel. Stand ready with the flamethrowers."

They did as they were told.

Coyle could see that thing picking its way towards them, its faint luminous shine lighting up the graveyard dimensions of the grotto. It was plowing over anything in its path—free-standing pillars and polished black towers that looked to be part of the city or another that had sunken into the earth or been swallowed by it. It took them off like saws felling trees, pushing ever forward like some immense glowing fleshy ghost, all the while making that sharp, strident whining sound.

"Get ready," Dayton said.

The cries of the beast were answered by an uncanny keening sound that rose to a solid wall of almost musical piping, wavering sharply and echoing morbidly through the grotto. This was the Old Ones, Coyle knew, directing their creature.

He heard it approaching the slope.

Closer.

Closer yet.

The tension of the men waiting for it was like an unbroken circuit of dread.

"Jesus," Long said when it came in sight, moving unbelievably fast.

"Shoggoth," Dayton said.

It was a slithering fleshy mass of gray and black tissue seamed with pink and red convolutions, a liquiform accumulation of dully luminous protoplasm formed into some great spherical mantle about the size of a pick-up truck. Dozens of rudimentary eyes opened on its greasy surface amongst wiry tendrils and slick bubbles that expanded and deflated like they were breathing.

It moved, it slithered, it wriggled, an abhorrent perpetual motion machine, toad-fleshed, jelly-eyed, an amebal vomit-gush of wormy tissue, oozing pulp, and coiling entrails.

It was repulsive beyond words and the stink of it . . . carrion liquefying with rot.

It waited there.

"Burn it?" Long said, awaiting orders.

Dayton was watching it. "No. Not yet. If it was going to attack, it would have."

Coyle was shaking. His entire body was shaking. Nothing had ever made him feel like this thing . . . simultaneously sickened, frightened, and raging. At that moment he lived only to kill it.

He watched it in his flashlight beam

And worse, *it* was watching him.

On the mantle of the creature itself, a single huge juicy yellow eye opened and stared at him with a slit pupil. A clear drop of liquid rolled from it like a tear.

It knows me, somehow it knows me, Coyle found himself thinking as some braying chant—equal parts wicked and withering—echoed through his mind on oil-gloss raven's wings. *It recognizes who I am and where I came*

from. It knows that it is the progenitor, the godhead sea of life, the keeper of the double-helix.

A thousand disjointed images flew through his head and at such speed he could not grasp even a single one or hope to form a chain of logic from the impressions the Shoggoth gave him. His brain was a fall of black ash and superannuated dust, the ghosts of the eons filling his skull–

The Shoggoth.

That from which all earthly life and the life of a million other worlds had been engineered. But was it wise? He could sense an intelligence there, cold and distant, but an intelligence all the same, one degenerated by the chill rain of millions upon millions of years. And with it . . . something else. Remorse. Self-loathing. A dire hatred of what it was and what it was made to be by its masters, the Old Ones, and an absolute feral loathing for all the life that sprang from its biogenetic loins.

Rising from the warm, dead seas of the Precambrian, it had survived Achaean and Proterozoic time, watched as the Paleozoic became the Mesozoic and finally the Cenozoic, witnessing extinctions and comets, ice ages and the shifting of poles and the rising of mountains and seas turned to deserts. Its kind waited it all out, sleeping away down here in their frozen tombs in black cellars of dead cities while men rose from apelike ancestors and skittered across hillsides like white ants, self-important, brimming with conceit over their mastery of nature and their rising rudimentary intellect, never knowing, never guessing in their supreme arrogance that they had been engineered, created to fulfill a purpose and that purpose was to be harvested, wheat to the scythe as the Old Ones had engineered, modified, and harvested so many life forms.

It was part of the cycle and men were no more important than livestock or germs on a slide.

An organic technology.

Nothing more. Human society, culture, religion—all of it was synthetic, plastic, generated from original archetypes bred into the species to have the very effect they indeed had. Intelligence was developed, genetics modified, brains engineered.

Now came the time of the reaping.

And the Shoggoth recognized it, knowing that it would outlive this little controlled experiment on Earth as it had on a thousand worlds. It was the helix and it was eternal and men were only dust to be scattered by the wind, just another page in its book of days.

But for it all, as it looked upon Coyle with a barely flickering consciousness, it felt sorrow.

Coyle came out of it knowing he had been in some weird psychic uplink with the creature and that it would have gone on for some time because the Shoggoth had the time. An hour, a day, a month or a year or ten of them were all the same to it.

But what broke the connection was the call of its masters.

A keening and shrill, insect-like cry which was the sound of the huntsman's horn that drove the hounds: the beast reacted. It closed that eye and shut Coyle away from it.

He noticed something else right away: that the accretion of those tumor-like bubbles or fleshy nodes were timing their expansions with the dominant keening of those piping voices. And, yes, dear God, there were tiny oval openings at their apexes like . . . *mouths.* Each time he heard those piercing cries, the bubbles expanded and those openings puckered wide.

The Shoggoth made a gurgling sound like a rumbling belly, waves of flaccid motion rolling through it. More tentacles rose up, these blood-red and slicked with slime, puckering mouths where their suckers should have been.

Each mouth made a low, mucid mewling sound that almost sounded like the squealing of infants.

Coyle bit down on a mittened fist out of horror, disgust, and . . . and pity.

The Old Ones were tormenting it.

It could not refuse.

It let out a blaring and harsh cry somewhere between a caw and a squeal that was shrill and cutting. And no one there could doubt that it was a cry of something like torment.

The Shoggoth moved.

It became a writhing tower of flesh, a fetal embryonic horror of budding limbs and licking segmented tongues, whipping trunk-like tentacles barbed with spines and snaking gut-ropes like corkscrewing larva. It did not just crawl up the slope, it *glided*. It came on with a hundred pustulant eyes watering with bile and jutting shrieking mouths like suckering pink-ringed blow holes peeling back to reveal narrow teeth like fishbones and surgical needles.

Long didn't wait, he torched it.

It rose up, tentacles lashing and flesh bulging and throbbing. Its cry of rage became one of low, bubbling pain. It came through the curtain of flame with a horrid rolling motion, filled with unearthly wrath and Long doused it again as more tentacles looped free like worms from carrion.

And by then, everyone was shooting.

It was part anger, part repulsion, and part hysteria. Fingers found triggers and kept jerking, needing to vanquish the thing, needing to eliminate something so invidiously offensive to the human mind.

Bullets and buckshot punched into that squealing mass of flames, cutting holes through it, spraying tissue and fluids in every direction. Steam and smoke blew off it. Pools of sizzling ichor spilled over the ice. And Long squirted more fire onto it, wetting it down.

And the thing screamed. With volume.

But it did not die.

It surged forward, casting aside burning sheets of tissue, and was up the rise before anyone could even move or think of it.

It took Long.

It took him by the head in one of those puckered, toothed mouths that darted forward on a flabby neck. That mouth went rigid and blubbery lips engulfed him right up to the shoulders. Then there was a gurgling sound and gray fetid slime splashed over his entire body in a snotty, milky web. He thrashed as the Shoggoth mashed his head to pulp with a sickening popping sound, licking up skullmeat like sauce . . . then a liquescent, serous sucking sound began and Long's body went rigid and his ECWs collapsed as he was literally vacuumed dry.

The beast spit him out, just bones in a parka and polar suit, washed down with glistening bloodwine that steamed in the cold.

By then they were all running.

A nightmarish retreat through that stygian netherworld, skating and slipping over the lake of ice as the beast pursued them, screeching and whining, its mass shuddering with agonal convulsions that no doubt had something to do with the constant, directed stridulous piping noises of the Old Ones.

But it was injured.

Reja turned to fight. Dayton screamed at him to retreat, to follow orders, but Reja had just watched his friend die and he had now parted company with command. "GET TO THE TUNNEL!" he shouted. "I'M GONNA BURN THIS MOTHERFUCKER!"

Injured or not, the Shoggoth vaulted at him and Reja emptied a steam of fire at it that covered it in flame. Then it rose up and took him, a living burning pelt, drowning him in slime and undulant viscera and teeth like knives. The beast absorbed him, making him part of its massive girth . . . but in the end it collapsed to the ice, spinning in a sickly, weakened circle as it blazed and sizzled under the rising flames, snapping and popping and letting forth plumes of oily black smoke that stank like cremated hides.

But before it died, it let out one last rasping cry, a death-song, that was high and cutting.

And the very worst thing is that from within the distant city, that cry was *answered.*

47

IT TOOK THEM AN easy thirty minutes to climb back up the tunnel and they never slowed or wavered, for from below they could hear the raging, roaring shriek of what had answered the dying Shoggoth's call.

When they made it out, Gwen and Horn were still there waiting, but there was no time for explanations.

Staying together, they marched back towards the passage that would lead them to the grotto above, Emperor One. That rumbling, grinding sound was getting louder and louder as whatever was down in that circular ice tunnel began to rise, the cavern shaking with its approach.

They made it to the Polar Haven and beyond when all around them, dipping and buzzing, rising and falling, were the Old Ones, hiding no more. They were droning and circling, piping with a reverberating wall of noise. They had come now and they had come in numbers as they had in the old, forgotten times. Everyone there could feel the primeval horror of their race gripping them, the fear these things inspired, the low booming headaches that psychic contact with the members of the hive always brought.

Horn made to fire up into their masses, but Dayton stayed him. "No. Leave 'em. If they were after us, they would've done something by now. We have to get out of here."

As they moved towards the passage, Coyle kept his light on them, amazed at how many there were, grimly fascinated at how they hovered and propelled themselves about. In the jumping lights, it was like a dark summer pond had brought all of its mosquito larvae to term at the same moment, an unceasing, busy, buzzing multitude of winged adults filling the sky.

You're not going to stop us, Coyle thought at them and knew perfectly well that they heard him, understood his petty defiance all too well. *You can't stop us from getting out of here. We won't let you.* But he knew how ridiculous, how childish such thoughts were put up against the immensity of

the hive. If the Old Ones wanted to, they *would* stop them. But, somehow, that's not what this was about. That's not what this was about at all.

But if not . . . then what?

Coyle, though, felt he knew.

"They're summoning something up out of that tunnel and we better get out of here before it shows."

"What?" Gwen said. "What's down there?"

"A Shoggoth," Coyle said and would say no more.

And no sooner had those words left his mouth and registered with the others than there was a huge, resounding eruption of motion as whatever it was entered the cavern with a moist and squeaking noise and a bestial roaring that shook icicles free from above.

"MOVE!" Dayton said. "GODDAMMIT, MOVE!"

It was no easy bit pushing themselves over the ice in their cumbersome boots and Stabilicers with what they'd already been through, with the cold that tapped their strength, the thrumming psychic energy of the hive itself that seemed to eat at their reserves on some essential level. But they did. They moved and fought and then Dayton's light picked out the passage.

Coyle turned back once, spearing the blackened cavern with his light.

What he saw in that brief instant sent him rushing headlong into the passage.

Another Shoggoth . . . but about five times the size of the one they'd burnt.

It came out of the tunnel like an opaque eruption of convulsive whale blubber rising from a red ocean with a spray of stinking charnel slime and dull phosphorescence. A titanic black shape that rolled right over the Polar Haven with a sluicing, oily motion. He caught only a glimpse of it, but what he saw was enough: an immense wave of gray jelly with dozens of shining yellow-golden eyes, jointed limbs emerging from the mass and reaching out.

"Hurry!" he said to the others. "Jesus Christ, hurry!"

48

EMPEROR ONE

WHEN THEY REACHED THE grotto above, moving away from that gargantuan noise of slithering and clicking and squirming that was coming after them, they saw Norrys step out from behind one of the Hypertats. He was smiling. But his eyes were dead as slate.

"Hey, it's about time," he said. "Been waiting for you."

"I'll bet you have," Dayton said and shot him point blank in the chest.

Norrys wheeled around, emitted a sharp little cry that was more rage than pain and dropped to one knee. Then Dayton sprayed him with slugs and he hit the ice, flailing and screaming, blood spurting out of him that was incredibly bright and red.

He thumped around for a moment or two.

Went still with a final spasmodic jerking of his legs.

And for maybe ten seconds nobody said a thing. There was only the rumbling vibrations of that thing forcing itself up the passage and the cracking of the glacier, clouds of exhaled breath rolling into the flashlight beams.

And then two pale legs came out of the collar of Norrys's polar suit, followed by a third and a fourth. And then a parasite, this one an adult apparently, came creeping out, its segmented body glistening with slime, its legs pulling it away from the corpse. It was connected by two strings of red tissue that pulled taut and snapped like rubber bands. Fighting against the cold, it clicked over the ice and then Horn pulled his ice-axe off his belt and swung at it. The pick speared the creature right between two of its bony plates.

Horn lifted it up into the air, firmly impaled by the axe.

White blood dribbled from it and sizzled on the ice. Blood that was alien in nature, completely bleached of hemoglobin. The parasite's legs bicycled madly in the air with a sickening clicking noise.

"Ugly motherfucker, all right," Horn said and tossed it and the axe away.

Yes, it was ugly, Coyle got to thinking. And ugly in more than just its skeletal, leggy appearance. What it was designed for was equally as ugly.

Parasites.

The Old Ones must have used them for mind control, something like that. Because Norrys, despite his eyes, had seemed perfectly normal to them. If it hadn't been for seeing that thing below trying to pass itself off as Norrys and the others, they would have accepted him as one of their own and taken him back with them.

And then what?

Would he have become an incubator, too?

But there was no time for idle speculation.

"That thing's coming fast," Horn said to Dayton. "We'll never make it back to the chopper in time."

"It's on its way in," Dayton said, listening through his headset.

Coyle was with them as they panned their lights down into the passage. The thing coming after them wasn't visible yet, but definitely on its way. It was rushing up at them out of the frozen darkness below and he could feel it down there, surging and rising, coming on with a cremating stink of carrion and rotten fermentation, a slithering and unspeakable horror his mind could not wrap itself around.

"We need to stall it," Dayton said.

"The fuel barrels," Horn said. "Battle of the Bulge."

"What?" Gwen said.

But Coyle got it. *The Battle of the Bulge*. In the movie, the allies roll flaming fuel barrels down at Nazi tanks and sink them in a sea of fire. And that's exactly what they were going to do. Gwen just didn't understand the reference. There were just some things in life, like war movies, that were particularly a male province. Women just didn't understand the attraction of

cinematic warfare. Or most didn't. And Coyle did not think he was sexist in thinking that.

Everyone ran over to the pallets with the yellow fuel drums on them. They tipped the barrels onto the ice and rolled them over to the passage. Using ice-axes, they popped the seals on barrel after barrel and then rolled them down the ice runway to what was coming on. Six barrels and then a seventh, fuel splashing and spraying.

"That'll have to do," Dayton said.

Everyone got their balaclavas on, hoods zipped up tight, and went over to the opening of the Emperor cave itself. Then Dayton tossed a phosphorus grenade down there that went up with mushrooming flames.

Coyle wasn't there to see it.

But he did see Dayton running towards them, the flash of blinding light from deeper in the grotto. And everyone heard the barrels go up with a thundering noise. And what came after it: the roar of the beast that shook the glacier.

Then Horn was leading them out into the blackness of Desolation Trough.

The wind screamed and whipped, ice fog and drift blowing in every direction. Not looking back, the survivors descended the guyline into the raging hell of the Trough, the howl of the wind blocking out the noise of what was behind them.

49

IN THE REAR COMPARTMENT of the Icewolf, Coyle sat next to Gwen, both of them strapped into their webseats and hanging on tight . . . to their harnesses and to each other, as the chopper began to life free of the ice.

We made it, he wanted to say to her over the headset in his helmet, but didn't dare. He was too afraid that he would jinx them at this, the most critical juncture of their escape. For at any moment, that primal horror could come at them out of the darkness and crush the chopper like a tin can, sucking out the warm jelly within.

Stop it, just fucking stop it already–

The chopper shook.

Began to rise.

Ten feet off the ground, the rotors whipping and thudding against the storm, it shuddered, tipped back to earth, bounced off the ice and rose up again, this time holding its own against the wind.

Coyle could feel the bite of the massive turbines that lifted them up into the tempest and held them there, man's technology facing off against nature's wrath. The chopper lifted up and up and he could feel that sucking sensation in his belly, the sensation of sudden ascent that you got from a rising elevator. Then the chopper banked to the right and swung around in a wide circle. Rising, still rising, up and up and up for maybe five minutes, and then coming down again and not by accident.

What the fuck?

Dayton was up in the cockpit and over the headset, Coyle heard him say, "Find that fucker and fix it."

Then one of the pilots: "Target acquisition . . . whatever you got down there, it's sending out one hell of a heat signature."

"Arm those Hellfires," Dayton said.

And that's when he realized they were going after it.

The Shoggoth.

Or sealing up the Emperor at the very least.

Gwen's hand tightened around his own.

The chopper continued to descend, zipping down like a hunting wasp in search of prey.

"Oh, God," Coyle said under his breath.

When he'd boarded the Icewolf in the compound of Polar Clime, he'd seen the wings thrusting out from either side, the stacked pods of rockets beneath them. He'd asked Reja what they were for and Reja had winked at him, said, *Hellfire missiles. They're for whatever we find.* And that's what was going on now. The pilot was arming the missiles and they were about to let them fly, fly at whatever they had locked onto.

They chopper came down into the Trough at such a velocity, Coyle thought he might pass right out cold. His belly was flipping around and bile was coming up the back of his throat. He didn't know if it was from fear of crashing or from descent or both. But Gwen was feeling it, too, gripping his hand so tightly he thought she might smash it.

"Ready, locked and loaded," one of the pilots said.

Oh, shit.

In the enclosed confines of the Icewolf, Coyle did not see what burst free of the mouth of Emperor Cave. And that was probably a good thing. There are certain things it is better not to see, to only know in your heart as shapeless nightmares.

The creature was so large it actually widened the mouth of the cave as it emerged in an eruption of ice and force, a noxious outpouring of fleshjelly that reconfigured itself, mutating and shifting and oozing as it broke free. It rolled out into the howling blackness on massive, stubby, trunk-like tentacles set with brilliant red orbs, leaving a trail of steaming slime in its wake. Its body was mottled with orange, green, and gray striations . . . bloated, fungous, and chambered like a nautilus, sheaths of jagged and rubbery bones fanning out and connected by a membranous tissue. It had jointed insect-like limbs ending in thrashing triple-pronged hooks and three heads that jutted from the quivering mass horizontally, heads set with

dozens of glaring greenish-gold eyes, each with a mouth whose jaws were like the webbed fingers of a hand opening up, revealing interlocking rows of spiraling teeth and a dozen licking black tongues.

And it was with these mouths that it cried out with a shrill, bellowing wail that sounded like an air raid siren ripping through the darkness, slitting it right open and making it bleed. That cry cycled out and out and it was this that Coyle heard, made him pull into himself, right before the missiles took flight.

By then, the Icewolf was already pulling up out of the Trough, climbing hard to avoid the Cerberus Icefall in the distance.

But that's how the Hellfire missiles worked.

No need for line-of-sight firing.

Once they were locked onto their targets, they would find them regardless of which direction they were fired from. Laser-guided, they would find said targets and nothing, not even the Old Ones, could stop them.

The Shoggoth rose up, roaring and screeching and filling the storm with its primordial anger . . . and the Hellfire missiles came screeching down at it, armed with high-explosive and incendiary warheads.

Impact.

The beast went up like the Fourth of July, the HE rounds obliterating it with rolling, thunderous concussions of pure force, and the incendiaries finished the job by turning all that fleshy debris and raining tissue into a firestorm that made the icescape glow with flickering light.

The Shoggoth was gone.

Ice was blasted, melted, then frozen up again just as quickly.

And the Icewolf climbed and climbed, the wind trying to throw it against the walls of the Trough. There were a few scary moments when the pilots fought hard to reign her in. But, finally, the controls responded and the chopper veered over the jutting plates of the Cerberus Icefall and lifted free of Desolation Trough, screaming across the escarpments of the Beardmore Glacier and disappearing into the polar blackness.

50

POLAR CLIME

AFTER THE CHOPPER DROPPED them off and Coyle stepped into the dome, exhausted, aching, but his mind weirdly exhilarated, he expected to feel a sense of calm, of security.

But that's not what he felt at all.

He felt tension.

That invidious atmosphere was still there, still feeding off itself. In some ways, it had not lessened at all since Butler was killed . . . or destroyed.

There was something, something.

He had the strangest feeling he was being watched. It had been like that for weeks at Clime now, the sense that eyes were on you all the time. But this was different. This was not subtle and unknown, but immediate and visible.

That negative energy had been drained for a time from the death of Butler, but now it was gaining strength and he could feel it.

It was getting stronger.

"You're feeling it, too, aren't you?" Gwen said to him.

"Yes."

She held his hand. "It's . . . it's almost like it's hard to breathe. The rest of 'em don't feel it because they've been here the whole time . . . but we can." She pursed her lips, swallowed. "It's . . . it's awful."

And it was. Absolutely. Like the atmosphere of Clime was spiritually rancid, noxious. Gwen was right. The air *did* feel heavy. It was almost repellent with dread and blackness and a burgeoning insanity.

Coyle could feel the energy rising. It was like standing next to a generating station as it cycled up. His skin was crawling. He felt like he was shaking inside. Even his molars were aching. Maybe it was just the after-

effect of what they'd seen at Emperor, but he was beginning to think it was much more localized than that.

He swept Gwen into his arms, kissing her first with his mouth and then his tongue.

"Mama kind of likes that."

"You saved my life today," he said.

"It's what I do."

He tried to feel good about things. They had struck against the Old Ones and had a victory of sorts, even though it cost quite a few lives. There should have been some sense of triumph but there was not. When Butler was here, things had been bad. That weird, eldritch energy had been rising by the day and now it was again.

But how to explain that?

It wasn't his imagination: Gwen felt it, too.

Butler was more than a member of the hive, he thought then. *She—like them all—became an avatar for it, a conduit. Part of it.*

With that in mind there was only one possible explanation: there was another conduit here.

"But there can't be," Gwen said. "We'd know it."

"If it was at Clime . . . what if it's not? What if all the time it's been somewhere else? An energy source, a battery, that Butler drew off of and is still running? Still running, still active, still dangerous to us all?"

She looked at him with warm, wet eyes. "But where?"

51

ICEBOX TWO

TEN MINUTES LATER THEY were in a Sno-Cat, heading out across the plateau in the darkness. The wind whipped drift in fine sheets that glanced off the cab like powdered glass. The headlights were filled with spiraling white. The plateau was flat like a sheet of paper, only a few fields of sastrugi to be seen. Out here, there were no crevasses, no nothing. Just the blackness and the endless frozen crust of the plateau itself. Since there were no radio beacons to home onto or any flagged ice road to follow, they navigated by GPS. It took them about twenty minutes.

Finally, Frye said, "There it is. Hope this ain't a wild goose chase, Nicky."

Icebox Two appeared as a mound that rose like bread dough from the frozen whiteness. A few timbers jutted from it, part of a corrugated roof, but nothing else. In the headlights of the Cat, blown by drift, it was shadowy and unreal as it rose up before them. Like a giant igloo or the wicked witch's cottage in Hansel and Grethel, only this time made from spun sugar of the purest white. Frye brought the Sno-Cat to a halt and left it running. In that kind of cold, you didn't dare turn off an engine. Not out on the desolation of the polar plateau.

As Coyle stepped out into the freezing air, he knew he had tracked down the source: he could feel it right up his spine.

He led the way to the mound anxiously, but also apprehensively. He'd gotten real good at listening to that inner voice of his and it was practically screaming in his head at that moment. He knew what he was looking for as he circled the mound of ice and snow.

"Look," he said, standing there in the darkness and bitter cold. He was panning his light around and the evidence was unmistakable.

"Footprints for sure," Frye said. "Somebody's been out here."

"And quite a bit, I'd say," Gwen put in.

They searched around until they found a depression in the snow. The prints were heavy around it. Using his ice-axe, Frye dug away at the drift and there was a slit in the snow that he widened easily into a man-sized hole. Somebody had indeed dug their way in and that somebody was probably still in there. It looked like the burrow of a worm, very confining and claustrophobic.

"I'll go first," Coyle said. "You two follow after a minute. I don't want us bunching up in there if something happens."

"Be careful," Frye said. "Might not be much holding it together."

With his flashlight in one mittened hand and the SPAS-12 in the other, Coyle entered the tunnel. There was enough room for one man on his belly to squirm along like a snake, but not much more. The walls brushed his shoulders and the ceiling scraped against the top of his hood. Little clumps of snow fell all around him. The tunnel snaked so that it was almost always angling away; there was no way to see what was around the next turn. The flashlight beam made it glow yellow and weird.

Then it opened and Coyle saw a room.

He shined his light around before dropping down in there. The floor was buckled, icicles draped from the heaving ceiling. A bubbling seam of ice had burst through one wall and spread into a pool. There were a few old metal desks, a bookshelf covered in ice, the gray walls covered in frost an inch thick.

Carefully, he slid out of his hole and dropped onto the floor. He didn't have his Stabilicers on and it was slippery. He could hear Frye coming down the tunnel now, grunting.

But other that, it was quiet in there.

The air was unpleasantly heavy and blank with silence. Ice crystals spun like dust motes in the flashlight beam. Grim shadows hung in the corners. Just an icy crypt that should have felt pretty neutral, but felt anything but. Because there was something here, something hiding and waiting, and it was a hostile thing.

Coyle could feel it.

Frye pushed through the opening, swearing, and dropped down. About thirty seconds later Gwen showed up. Coyle was grateful to have them. The atmosphere down there was beginning to feel toxic.

Frye played his light around, a sack of flares and jellied gasoline bombs —courtesy of Horn—tied to his belt. "This is the old comm room by the looks of it," he said.

Besides the desks, there were file cabinets and meteorological charts rolled up like posters and stuck in cubbies in the walls. Not much else besides a calendar from 1978 on the wall.

Gwen walked around, breathing in the leaden air, studying the warped floors and chasing away nests of shadow. "It looks almost sterile in here."

"It's been abandoned a long time," Frye said.

"Yes . . . but no beer bottles? No cigarette butts? No nothing? Seems to me that somebody from Clime out on a kick would have dug in here before this. Out of curiosity if nothing else. You know how people are."

She was right, Coyle knew.

Places like this are magnets for people. In the crowded stations in the summer, people look for places like this to come and be alone with their ice wives or ice husbands. Maybe bring a Primus stove, a bottle of wine, a sleeping bag, have a little fun. But what they were seeing was a stark emptiness like a museum display. Like something preserved behind glass.

"Do you know why this station was abandoned?" she asked him.

"No. Not really."

"I just wonder," she said.

So do I, he thought. *I wonder if there was a real good reason not to leave men out here in the summer and winter. If maybe something happened. Maybe they started losing it, maybe they saw things and heard things and felt things. Maybe what was under the ice started to call their names . . .*

He didn't doubt any of it, because right then he was feeling something. Something alive inside him that was threatening to eat his guts right out.

"C'mon," he finally said.

They went through a half-opened doorway at the far side of the room that was frozen in place. There was a shadowy corridor ahead of them that was piled with old barrels and cardboard boxes. The floor was duckboard, frost-heaved, and badly worn. The gloom was thick and hungry, cut only by their lights. Their footsteps echoed out and made it sound like they were being followed. Doorways leading into empty rooms were like the sprung lids of coffins.

"Stay together, kids," Frye said, though it did not need saying. "Easy to get lost down here."

They found the old bunkhouse with its rows of gray metal cots stripped of mattress pads, curled photos of girls in bikinis still tacked to the walls . . . many of which had Farrah Fawcett-styled tresses. They found the galley with its tables and chairs, the pantry still holding canned goods. There were cups and plates set out, a coffee pot and a loaf of frozen bread. In the radio room, a game of solitaire was still laid out, the cards frosted to the table. All in all, it had an eerie feeling to it, a station filled with lingering memories and ghosts. Like exploring the *Mary Celeste* after she had been emptied.

But there was no mystery to Icebox Two that they knew of. Back in the seventies and before, things had just been abandoned on the Ice. These days everything from sewage to scrap to garbage was shipped out so as not to disturb the environment, not so back then.

Yet, even knowing that, Coyle could not get past the feeling that this place had been abandoned. And in a hurry.

Many of the rooms were collapsed beneath shrouds of ice and snow. The corridor leading to the generator room was caved-in. The floors creaked and the walls cracked as they explored and everyone was very aware of how dangerous this was, how the old trusses might buckle at any moment and bury them alive in a womb of ice and debris.

Then they came down a small hallway with bulging walls and a ceiling that hung down like a full belly. Ice was hanging in stalactites everywhere. It led to a heavy wooden door that was not froze shut, but locked. Locked from the other side.

"Look out," Frye said as an old iron pipe on the ceiling swung down, nearly braining Coyle. It ran the length of the room disappearing into the

wall. The rusted bracket that held it was hanging by one badly worn screw.

"Turn off your lights," Coyle whispered to them.

"What?" Gwen said.

"Turn 'em off."

They did and then they all saw what he saw. For coming beneath the doorway was a faint, flickering illumination. And there was nothing down in that darkened catacomb which could account for that.

"All right then," Coyle whispered. "Let's invite ourselves in."

But they never had to for someone came out to meet them.

In fact, their host came right *through* the door without opening it. And seconds before it happened, they all began to feel it as an intensifying static charge in the air.

What they saw was Cassie Malone . . . or what had once been Cassie.

She came drifting out, a luminous sugar-bone white ghost from a shadowbox, a high-voltage galvanic ghoul membrane-fleshed in crackling cellophane with an electrified crystal skeleton beneath trying to burn its way out.

Gwen let out a cry at the sight of her, stumbling backward.

"Don't let her touch you," Frye said. "She's like Slim now."

She drifted forward, a conductive, voltaic puppet caught between life and death, blue-white static charges forking out from her and crawling over the ceiling. She reached out to them with glowing fingers like live fuses that smoked and popped, eyes gibbous moons of pure atomic fission.

Coyle fired a round into her and there was a flash of light as the steel pellets made contact with her supercharged electrical field.

Her mouth was a shriveled black wormhole and she called out to them with a shrieking discordant voice that was part maniacal laughter, part noisemaker, part hissing steam oven.

What she was saying they did not know because the air around her or the field she created did not seem to conduct sound as they understood it.

The closer she came, the colder the room got and the colder they got. It was some sort of endothermic, heat-sucking, reaction: she was drawing

energy from them to give herself form and motion.

It was Frye who saved them.

He jumped up grabbed the hanging pipe on the ceiling and brought it down into her, grounding her as he had done with Slim.

The effect was instantaneous.

Cassie made a screeching/whining sound like a drill bit through metal and there was a blinding flash of light and a resounding explosion that put them all on their asses . . . arcing whirlwinds whipped through the room, ice flew and frost filled the air along with burning bits of what had once been Cassie Malone.

"It burned," Frye said, looking at his hands where he had grabbed the pipe. "It burned."

Gwen checked him over but he seemed no worse for wear.

"Look over there," he said, shining his light around and picking out something wedged in the corner that they had missed.

It was a body, curled and blackened.

It was an absolute horror. Just a shrunken, leathery thing that looked like it was made of pine bark. Not a man, really, but a mummy pulled from a tomb . . . dry and corded, limbs contorted. Just awful.

"It's Harv," Coyle said. "He must have dug his way in."

Frye nodded. "Sure, *she* called him out here. And she would have called each and every one of us out here sooner or later."

"I've heard the voices, too," Gwen said.

"But she was just a conduit, not the battery itself," Coyle told them, knowing he was getting close now.

The locked plank door that Cassie had come through. That was where he had to go. He went over there and . . . right away, something happened.

Icebox Two began to shake.

Noises broke open all around them . . . whisperings and pinging noises, a metallic screeching that seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere. The floor was vibrating like dozens, hundreds of hammers were banging on it from below. Squealing sounds came from the walls and it sounded like

screaming human voices, hollow and drawn-out and impossibly shrill, were echoing up the corridors.

"What the fuck?" Frye said, looking around with wide eyes like he'd just woken up in the belly of a haunted house.

That weird vibration did not lessen, it increased.

There was a pounding like fists coming from everywhere, the air crackling like some immense static charge was breaking loose.

Gwen made it like two steps, clutched her head in her hands and was driven right down to her knees.

The electrical discharge in the air made Coyle's skin crawl, made his belly flop, filled him with a manic hysteria that made him want to scream and cry and vomit out his insides.

And then the worst thing of all: that insane, high piping.

It came from everywhere, rising into a feverish pitch like a thousand pan flutes blaring out, strident and cutting, amping up into a solid and wavering wall of shrilling noise. Coyle felt his vision blur as he hit the floor. Felt tears run from his eyes and blood trickle from his nose. His nerves were jangling and quivering.

And then he saw *them*.

As a thrumming, scraping agony that was far beyond a headache ripped open in his head, he saw through eyes squeezed into slits what drifted out of the walls. Old Ones. Not living ones, but spectral representations, ghosts, wraiths that came boiling out of the walls in oozing, electrified trails of ectoplasm. They were everywhere, spreading their vast wings and screeching and piping and chittering. And all of them lit white with a pulsing glow like immense, ghostly night-moths, fluttering and flying, moving right through the walls like shades.

They'll drain our minds. They'll drain them dry.

But through the agony and that storm of phenomena, he knew. Knew what he was not supposed to know.

Behind that door . . . you are not supposed to go behind that door.

He crawled forward with his SPAS-12 as waves of force punched into him, driving him backward, compressing him, squeezing the air out of his lungs. It felt like his eyes would blow from their sockets, that his skull would come flying apart at any moment.

The door.

He fought his way to it, the room a spinning tempest of wind and cold and heat and undead things. He blew the door open with the SPAS-12 and saw–

An Old One.

It was no ghost. Not living, just a carcass sitting down there in the center of a pit scooped from the ice.

Dead.

Long dead. Just a mummy sheathed in ice, its limbs withered and eyestalks atrophied, wings threadbare and folded up like ratty umbrellas. The wind and force and psychic energy was coming from it, though, being channeled through it.

The battery.

It was the battery.

Coyle got the barrel of the assault shotgun up and pumped the trigger.

The Old One's mummy nearly shattered on impact it was so ancient. Its head fell apart, its torso cleaved out with cracks and fell into itself like a rotten gourd. And right away . . . the phenomena died away.

Then Frye was helping him to his feet.

"You okay?" Gwen said, wiping blood from her nose.

"I'll live."

"Fucking ghosts," Frye said. "What next?"

Down there in the pit, sharpened stakes had been driven into the ice. One last booby trap if you made it this far.

Coyle wondered how long the carcass had been there. Maybe since before the station had closed. Who could say? But it had probably been here all winter, dead maybe, but maybe not truly dead, a sort of a receiver or amplifier to toy with the crew.

A battery. A psychic battery.

Regardless, it wasn't as dead as it should have been. Coyle could feel that. For there was a magnetism to its remains. He could feel a headache thrumming in the back of his skull, opening up and trying to swallow him.

He turned away.

Frye lit his flare, ignited one of the gas bombs and tossed it at the thing. It shattered on the ice, jellied gasoline spraying over the mummy and sticking to it, burning bright and hot. He lit his two remaining bombs and threw them into the pit which was engulfed in flame.

"Let's get the hell out of here," Coyle said.

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THEY HAD SIGHTED POLAR Clime when Frye brought the Sno-Cat to a stop and just sat there, peering through the windshield.

"What?" Gwen said. "What now?"

But he stepped out of the cab wordlessly, standing on the treads and they joined him out there in the cold and wind. They did not feel either. For they were looking up into the sky which was clear and speckled by stars. Looking at something which filled each of them with a dread they could not adequately put into words.

"Look at them," Frye said. "Jesus, look at them . . ."

The stars were momentarily blotted out by a buzzing swarm of oblong bodies that flew like witches through the sky. Old Ones. And these were very much alive. They passed above the 'Cat and over the dome of Clime like a flock of migratory night-birds, the sound of them like a droning cloud of hornets abandoning their nest in a hollow tree.

There were so many they could not be counted.

"They're not hiding anymore," Gwen said. "They're showing themselves now."

Coyle watched them disappear in the glacial blackness above Antarctica. They had always been here. And always would be until the time came when they took to the sky to take possession of the world they had seeded with life and intelligence. And that time was getting closer by the day.

"Let's get back to camp," he said. "It's going to be starting soon now."

And they didn't need to ask him what he was talking about.

Because they knew.

The harvesting of the human race . . .

EPILOGUE

CONTACT

SETI—GREEN BANK,
WEST VIRGINIA
MARCH 28

THIS WAS THE DAY.

It had to come sooner or later. Everyone at SETI had firmly believed this. According to the Drake Equation, there were potentially thousands of planets out there with civilizations technologically-comparable to that of Earth and possibly hundreds far in advance of that. Sooner or later, one of them was going to grab a radio signal or a light emission and drop us a line.

And now it had happened.

But the truly unusual thing was that the signal was not coming from some extrasolar world. It was not originating from Tau Ceti or Epsilon Eridani or some other incredibly distant place.

It was coming from relatively nearby.

Callisto. Jupiter's moon.

There had been a lot of nonsense talked about Callisto ever since the Cassini 3 spacecraft dropped its probe there. Lots of buzz on the internet. Secret messages supposedly leaking out of Antarctica and even NASA itself. NASA, of course, was denying it all. And now this. Now this.

This is what Sadler did not like. This is what was making him suspicious.

Sadler was an astrophysicist and this should have been his dream, especially for a guy like him that had been involved in the search for ETI, ExtraTerrestrial Intelligence, for the past twenty years. He'd been with SETI during its heyday as a government project with a fat budget and during the NSF-funded Targeted Search and, yes, he'd been there when congress pulled the plug on it back in the '90's. SETI had survived that and become a private institution that thrived on heavy corporate and private donations.

So Sadler should have been ecstatic, and part of him was, but most of him was just concerned.

For the past six hours, the SETI network—both the ALA, the Allen Telescope Array, and Optical SETI—had been receiving signals from Callisto. Dream signals, really. High definition pulses directed at the Earth

in the form of both high-amplitude microwave and infrared waves. The beauty of this was that conventional radio waves could also be produced by quasars and pulsars and even black holes. Using infrared in addition to microwaves left absolutely no doubt that the signals were artificial. They were being sent by an unknown intelligence and apparently by a transmitter of exceptional strength.

Sadler was watching the hive of activity that the control room had become.

People were happy. They were shaking hands and hugging, talking openly and boldly about ETI as they hadn't in years. They were certain that SETI would soon be swamped with federal funds again. That congress would prioritize what it was they were doing and the NSF would be handing out blank checks. Sadler should have been celebrating, too, but he wasn't, and he honestly wasn't sure why.

What the hell is wrong with you? he thought as he sat there before a bank of computer screens that were hooked to the billion-channel analyzer. *Your whole life, everything you've been doing all these years, has been geared to this moment. You've ate, drank, and slept ETI. You've argued with nay-sayers and nearly come to blows with other close-minded theorists who glumly practiced their flat-earth science. This is vindication. You were not just some hard-headed, happily-deluded egghead with too many sci-fi paperbacks on the old bookshelf. You were right. Just as you always knew, you were RIGHT.*

Today is the day you've dreamed and fantasized about.

Can't you let out a cheer? A little one even?

But he couldn't. Because there was something damnably wrong about all this and he felt that right to his core. He did not doubt that the signal was extraterrestrial. He just saw trouble with it, like it was not the greatest news in the history of the race but the worst thing imaginable. He did not like it. Did not like the idea that there was some advanced civilization apparently based off of Callisto that had been monitoring us all these years and now decided to say howdy, how ya'll doing on that blue world out there?

There was something disturbing about this.

He had the craziest and most irrational feeling that a new chapter had been opened and by virtue of its revelations, there could never, ever be any

going back to the old one. This would blot it out entirely.

A hand clapped his shoulder and he saw Frank Clark standing there. Good old Frank. How many bottles had they killed discussing ETI and life on other worlds, divergent streams of evolution and technological and social development? Good God.

"The intensity is increasing," Clark said, toying with his scraggly gray beard as he did whenever he was nervous or on the verge of big things. "But I don't suppose that cheers you up any, does it, old hoss?"

Sadler tried to smile, but it just wouldn't come. "I don't know what the hell is wrong with me, Frank. I should be jumping for joy, but–"

"But you've got a bad feeling?"

"Yeah."

Clark nodded. "You're not alone, my friend. Look at this old face? Does it look happy? Does it look overjoyed? Well, it's not. I have the same feeling as you have." He laughed. "I feel like Oppenheimer . . . like we've just exploded the bomb."

"Maybe we're getting too old."

Clark looked around. "It's not just us, Carl. This whole thing has the young and the old by the collective balls. Lookit this place, will you? It's goddamn swarming. We were a handful yesterday and now we've got visiting scientists and diplomats. All the types that laughed at us last week. And what's worse is that this place is crawling with *spooks.* We got the NSA and the DIA and probably the CIA here, too. They claim they've only sent their best and brightest cryptographers, but I got an ugly feeling that our old girl, Little Miss SETI, is about to be absorbed by a larger entity with a lot of abbreviations in its title."

Sadler didn't like that part of it, either, but what could you do?

This whole thing had become political as well as scientific now and the military-industrial-intelligence machine had to get its particularly dirty, worn fingers in said pie.

SETI had picked up the microwave signals first.

They were the best equipped to do so. It was called the Omni-Directional Sky Survey Project. Its aim had been to canvas the sky in not just

a wide-range of radio frequencies, but also throughout the optical spectrum. So SETI grabbed it first with the ATA, but it wasn't long before their optical observatories at Harvard, Berkeley, and Columbus were in on the act. Pretty soon, Arecibo was in on it followed by the VLA radiotelescope system—Very Large Array—and dozens of others from England to Australia to the far reaches of the former Soviet Union. And the signals kept coming and getting stronger and stronger.

And everyone wanted to know what they were saying.

Thing was, they didn't seem to be saying a thing. What they had were high-frequency pulses, regular and directed, in the electromagnetic spectrum and they seemed to be shielded and encrypted. All the cryptographic muscle of the United States and its numerous allies were unable to break the code, if code it indeed was. The best they'd been able to do was digitally represent the signals in prime numbers. But these were terribly random and did not seem to repeat at any identifiable interlude.

So was it a message . . . or was it something else entirely?

Clark sighed. "I got a bad feeling in my gut, Carl, and so do you and you know what? I think they do, too. *All* of them."

Sadler was interested now.

"Everyone is nervous as hell, Carl. They're ready to have kittens. They laugh and they joke and they hoot and holler . . . but none of it touches their eyes. Their eyes are scared. I mean, they're *scared.* All the festive bullshit and ass-slapping and congratulating are fictions. *Fictions.* I can see it in their eyes. They're acting all happy-go-lucky because they know it's how they're *supposed* to act. They're playing the part. All of them. But inside?"

"Inside their guts are twisted up?"

"You got it. They feel like they're waiting for the phone to ring, you know? Waiting for the doctor to call and tell them whether that mass on their brains is benign or malignant." He swallowed a couple times like he had no spit in his mouth. "And you want my opinion, old buddy? It's going to be *malignant.*"

"Least it's not just me," Sadler said.

But he did not feel better. He could not get past the sense that this was not only going to change human culture, but warp it into something intrinsically diabolic. And there was no more common sense behind that anymore then there was about an astrophysicist with a Ph.D. from Cornell turning down one big-money radioastronomy position after another so he could follow his gut sense and hunt for bug-eyed monsters in outer space. He had done it because he felt that there was intelligence out there. No, he *knew* it. Just as he knew that there was something incalculably pestilent in these signals, something parasitic that would suck the blood out of the race drop by awful drop.

Clark cleared his throat. "Lucy . . . Lucy asked me to invite you and Karen for dinner Friday, Carl. She's making one of those terrible French seafood concoctions from her Juliet Child book. I told her I'd ask you, but if I were you I'd decline. She made me some kind of soup the other night and it tasted like rancid crayfish in salty, tepid water. Christ, it was unholy. Feel free to decline."

"We'll be there."

But the disturbing thing was that he didn't think they would be. That things like dinner parties and backyard barbecues were about to become things of the past, relics of a way of life that no longer existed. Because by Friday, the world was going to be a much different place and there wasn't a goddamn thing that he or anyone else in that massive room of cutting-edge technology could do about it.

"Something's happening, Carl."

And something was.

The natives were getting restless. Real restless. Everyone had gathered in little groups before the banks of computers that the cryptographers used, which were hooked up to the NSA and DIA's massive cryptological networks.

"Maybe . . . maybe they've decrypted the message," Clark said.

One of the crypt techs grabbing a cup of coffee overheard him and shook her head. "For something to be decrypted it must be *en*crypted. And I'm not sure this is encrypted at all. I don't think this is a message. Unless, well, unless it's meant to be subliminal somehow."

“What’s going on?” Sadler asked her.

She did not look at him, did not take her eyes off the overhead screen that digitally encoded the electromagnetic pulses, turned them into oscillating waves that everyone could see. “It may just be a stream of energy directed at us.”

Sadler felt a chill run up his spine. “To what end?”

She just shrugged and he knew it was pointless to grill her. She would not speculate or hypothesize wildly. It was not in her makeup. She was NSA and the cryptology techs of the National Security Agency knew how to keep their mouths shut.

“Look,” she said. “Do you see it? The wavelengths are changing. They’re erratic, but intensifying. It’s very . . . curious.”

And Sadler figured it was that, all right.

Something was about to happen and he could almost feel it building in the air of the institute like static electricity. Growing, powering up, potential energy about to go kinetic. And everyone seemed to be aware of it. They were not speaking. They were not doing anything but staring at the screen, transfixed by those jumping digitalized displays.

One of the techs turned up the audio so that everyone could hear what the radiotelescopes were hearing. Earlier it had been sort of a rumbling, mindless static like that you heard coming from a radio that could not lock onto a channel. But this was different. It, too, had changed. Not meaningless static now, but a rising and falling far-off drone as heard through a windstorm. And something else, a sound almost like respiration just beneath it. As if something out there was breathing and they were hearing the signature of that across the deadness of almost 400,000,000 miles of space.

The droning was getting louder now.

It was something insistent.

Something that would not be denied. Something that had been broadcast not to be deciphered or even understood really, but simply *listened* to.

Sadler felt a headache begin to build in the back of his skull.

He wanted to say: *Turn that noise off . . . do you hear? Turn it off before . . . it's . . . too . . . late . . .*

But he said nothing.

He just listened and felt something inside him give with a dull popping sound. All he could hear was that transmission. Nothing else, nothing else.

He did not like it, but he listened.

He did not seem to have a choice.

It was almost a living, organic sound like having your ear pressed up against a birth sac and listening to something waking up in there, hearing the subtle beat of a heart. It was like that. The sound of potential, of awareness, of activity. He was imagining Callisto out there in that blank womb of space around Jupiter, held in stasis by the planet's intense gravitational field like a metal filling trapped by the pull of a gigantic magnet. He was seeing that ancient moon in his mind . . . cratered and dark and crumbling like a prehistoric barrow pit . . . and hearing the hissing of its transmission as it grew louder and louder and made his thoughts scurry and fall over one another, crowd for room in his head as the droning and breathing rose up and dominated everything.

He was likening that noise to the sound a haunted house might make in the dead of night . . . or maybe what you would hear if you put a skull up against your ear like a conch shell. A hollow droning of nothingness just barely concealing the echoes of the distant past, the ghosts and crawling memories of antiquity that were beginning to stir, to awaken, oozing from the walls like malignant shadows.

"Carl . . ." Clark said, but got no farther than that.

Sadler tried to speak, but it was like he was trapped inside his own head, hiding in some creaking house as that droning wind rose higher and higher. He could do nothing but feel the drumming throb of that headache. He seemed beyond the reach of his somatic nervous system; incapable of voluntary action.

And not just him, but everyone in that room.

They stood around like statues, wide-eyed and tense, but absolutely motionless. Their lips did not speak and their eyes did not blink. Many had

odd little tics in the corners of their mouths. And more than a few were sweating and drooling.

The droning noise and that weird susurration of breathing were so very loud now that you could not have screamed above them. It owned everyone in that room and it would not let them go.

Sadler managed one last lucid thought before his mind was overwhelmed: *Dear God, it's no message . . . it's a signal sent to dominate and master, to break us down and own us . . .*

He was right.

The signals had been beamed from the megalithic structure that had recently risen through the frozen crust of Callisto just as it had been programmed to do upon first contact countless eons before. It generated the signals, amplified them, then directed them across space with great intensity to that warm, blue world called Earth. And here those electromagnetic pulses found their receivers in hundreds of megaliths across the globe. The pulses were gathered, refined, not dampened, but stepped-up and purified and reflected into a white noise that unlocked ancient directives and drives implanted in the human brain.

It may have sounded like a mindless droning or a hissing respiration.

But it was much more than that.

It was the final siren call of the race and the end times were at hand.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tim Curran lives in Michigan and is the author of the novels *Skin Medicine, Hive, Dead Sea, Resurrection, The Devil Next Door,* and *Biohazard,* as well as the novella *The Corpse King.* His short stories have appeared in such magazines as *City Slab, Flesh & Blood, Book of Dark Wisdom,* and *Inhuman,* and anthologies such as *Shivers IV, High Seas Cthulhu,* and *Sick Things.* Find him on the web at: www.corpseking.com.

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